OUTSIDER ART

Visionary Worlds and Trauma

Daniel Wojcik

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Praise for *Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma*

"Lavishly illustrated, many of the images never before seen by the public, this indispensable volume is steeped in details about the lives of outsider and visionary artists. Authoritative, informative, and accessible, this groundbreaking volume is a work of art itself as well as a monumental achievement in scholarship, one that forces us to rethink conventional notions of art and creativity."

—Michael Owen Jones, professor emeritus, Department of World Arts and Cultures, University of California, Los Angeles

"By exploring personal histories and traumatic experiences of creative people sometimes living at the fringe of society, Daniel Wojcik brings new insights into the phenomenon of outsider art. This comprehensive study will influence how outsider art is now seen and evaluated; it blurs the boundaries between insiders and outsiders and contributes to our understanding of art today. Engagingly written and wonderfully illustrated—in full color!—this is an essential resource that takes the reader on a mesmerizing and inspiring journey. Where are my paint brushes . . ."

—Peter Jan Margry, professor of European ethnology, University of Amsterdam

"Wojcik's new book seems destined to become an essential text for understanding the field today. *Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma* now brings a great deal of clarity and understanding not only to one of the major hotbeds of activity in the international art market, but to the creative act itself. It is a must-read for anyone serious about better understanding this fascinating subject."

—Roger Manley, Director of the Gregg Museum of Art & Design at North Carolina State University and curator of exhibitions of self-

taught art at more than forty other institutions, including the American Visionary Art Museum

“Wojcik’s informed writing—demonstrated by an almost encyclopedic knowledge of self-taught and outsider art and history—his original research, his balanced and nuanced thinking, the representative examples he discusses, and his ability to articulate his findings make this book required reading for anyone interested in outsider, self-taught, or contemporary folk art.”

—Carol Crown, professor emerita, University of Memphis, and coeditor of *Sacred and Profane: Voice and Vision in Southern Self-Taught Art*

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To the memory of my mother, Beatrice Ann Caponecchia (1930–2009)

And to Michael Owen Jones, mentor and pioneer in the study of vernacular artistic expression

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Outsider Art

Chapter 1

Inside the Art of Outsiders

On Formalism, Biography, and Cultural Milieu

During the past three decades, the phenomenon of outsider art has moved from the margins of cultural awareness toward the mainstream of the contemporary art world, captivating an international community of collectors, curators, dealers, scholars, and artists, as well as the general public. Often characterized as “raw art” that is created spontaneously and for entirely personal reasons, outsider art historically has been associated with individuals who have no formal artistic training and exist outside of the dominant art world—psychiatric patients, visionaries and trance mediums, self-taught individualists, recluses, folk eccentrics, social misfits, and assorted others who are isolated or outcast from normative society, by choice or by circumstance.

The allure of outsider art has spawned an industry of galleries, publications, museum exhibits, art fairs, and auctions. The community of outsider-art aficionados itself has been the subject of ethnographic study and journalistic exposé.[1] A canon of classic outsiders and visionaries has been established, and grants, commissions, and international awards routinely recognize and reward outsider artists. Their work has penetrated popular culture, adorning postage stamps and rock-and-roll album covers, and outsider artists have been

depicted in musical scores and off-Broadway shows. Their creations have been enthusiastically embraced by A-list artists, musicians, actors, scholars, and celebrities from Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Max Ernst, and Jean Dubuffet, to David Bowie, Leonard Nimoy, Robin Williams, Susan Sarandon, Jane Fonda, Jonathan Demme, Tommy Lee Jones, John Waters, and Bjork. Films about outsiders and visionaries have received critical acclaim, such as *Séraphine* (2008), *In the Realms of the Unreal: The Mystery of Henry Darger* (2004), and *Junebug* (2005).[2] Even Homer Simpson is celebrated as an outsider artist after his failed attempt to build a backyard barbeque pit, a disaster of metal parts stuck in cement, is discovered as a masterpiece by an excited gallery owner who informs him, "Outsider art couldn't be hotter!"[3] The outsider category has now extended to other expressive forms as well, including the off-beat music by self-taught individuals such as underground cult luminaries Hasil Adkins, Daniel Johnston, Lucia Pamela, the Shaggs, Wesley Willis, and Lonnie Holley, among others.[4]

With the opening of the Museum of Everything in London in October, 2009, advertised as "a space for artists and creators outside modern society," the art of self-taught outsiders achieved a new and trendy level of recognition. More than three-quarters of a million people have visited this travelling venue of creative exhibits, with its homespun, hipster vibe and inventive collaborations involving an entourage of artists, collectors, and celebrities including Cindy Sherman, David Byrne, Maurizio Cattelan, Ed Ruscha, Damien Hirst, Sir Peter Blake, Pete Townshend, Nick Cave, John Zorn, and Annette Messager.[5] At the 55th International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2013, the work of self-taught and outsider artists had a dominating presence, and the Museum of Everything's official affiliated exhibition of such art was a popular attraction. The director of the Biennale, Massimiliano Gioni, integrated outsider art into the show, exhibiting it alongside that of formally trained artists. The main exhibit was entitled *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico* (The Encyclopedic Palace), in honor of the self-taught Italian-American artist Marino Auriti (1891–1980), the working class owner of an auto body shop in the town of Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, who in his spare time constructed a sculptural prototype for a massive imaginary museum, meant to be the tallest building in the world and contain the history of all worldly knowledge, from the wheel to the satellite. The

Biennale's outsider-art emphasis made international headlines, with many commentators considering the event one of the best art exhibits in recent years and applauding its infusion of non-mainstream and outsider art into international art-world sensibilities as an overt challenge to the commercialization of contemporary art.[6] *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith proclaimed that 2013 "was the year that outsider art came in from the cold," and that increasing recognition of the importance of outsider art could be seen in recent acquisitions of major outsider-art collections by institutions such as the American Folk Art Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Milwaukee Art Museum, as well as influential exhibits of outsider art internationally (Smith, 2013).

No longer a rogue genre, outsider art commands attention more than ever before, having captured the popular imagination as a form of unharnessed and pure creativity. In turn, both the public and the market have embraced the notion of an "authentic art" that provides an alternative to the elitism and commercialism of the professional contemporary art world. John Maizels, an authority on the subject and the editor of the influential *Raw Vision* magazine posits, "It is no coincidence that the growing stature and influence of Outsider Art has happened over a period when the esteem of professional contemporary art has been held increasingly in question. The great avant-garde movements have faded into history and many feel they are faced today in our museums and galleries with an art which has become increasingly obscure and inaccessible." Maizels further suggests, "It is no wonder that an art with immediate appeal and immediate responses, that needs little critical explanation to be fully appreciated, an art that has real meaning, that stems from the roots of genuine creativity, that is forever innovative and original and truly reflects the individuality of its host of creators, cannot fail to touch an increasing and appreciative public" (1996: 228).

Adolf Wölfli, *Giant City, Band-Wald-Hall*, 1911. In *From the Cradle to the Grave*, Book 4, p. 213. Pencil and colored pencil on newsprint, 39 ¼ x 28 ¼ in. (99.7 x 71.7 cm). Courtesy Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland.

Even as this widespread fascination with art created outside the structures of the art world flourishes, the definition of outsider art remains elusive. The term itself is the subject of ongoing debate, promoted by some dealers and critics as a valid category, rejected by others as a deeply offensive concept, and often embraced in resignation for lack of a better word, or conflated with other terms such as “self-taught art,” “visionary art,” “art singulier,” “autodidact art,” “naïve art,” “idiosyncratic art,” or “contemporary folk art.” Adding to the confusion, the concept of outsider art

has different and very specific associations in Europe, where such art was initially identified and studied. In the United States, the awareness of outsider art is relatively recent. In the European context, outsider art is equated with *art brut*, a term that refers to works created by people with no artistic training, who are somehow disconnected from conventional culture and outside the art world, such as the mentally ill, trance mediums, self-taught isolates, and societal outcasts. Their work has been celebrated as unique, idiosyncratic, and seemingly without precedent. In the States, by contrast, dealers and critics often use the term *outsider art* loosely, in reference to a melange of non-mainstream works created by a varied demographic: untrained artists, children, inmates, contemporary folk artists, naïve artists, artisans from so-called Third World and developing nations, and members of specific ethnic groups. As a result, definitions of outsider art are unstable and contested, and "term warfare" has been waged on numerous occasions. Still, the concept of outsider art thrives as a term of convenience, a catchall signifier and marketing label for art outside the mainstream.[7]

Surveying the field of outsider art today, one encounters an astounding assortment of drawings, paintings, sculptures, embroidery, carvings, art environments, assemblages, and other artworks. This plethora of creative output is produced outside of the fine art echelons by a wide range of individuals. Some were diagnosed as mentally ill, such as the highly acclaimed Adolf Wölfli, Aloïse Corbaz, August Natterer, Martín Ramírez, and Carlo Zinelli. Others were inspired by religious experiences, dreams, or trance states, such as the Spiritualist mediums Madge Gill and Augustin Lesage, the apocalyptic visionaries Howard Finster and Sister Gertrude Morgan, or the Haitian Vodou practitioners Hector Hyppolite and Pierrot Barra. The work of self-taught southern African Americans is ubiquitous in the outsider-art world: Bill Traylor, Minnie Evans, Bessie Harvey, Thornton Dial, William Edmondson, James "Son" Thomas, Sam Doyle, Royal Robertson, Purvis Young, Mose Tolliver, and Lonnie Holley are just a few of the many highly regarded artists. Individuals who have constructed entire art environments also have been included in the outsider and visionary art category: Sabato (Simon) Rodia and his Watts Towers in Los Angeles; Ferdinand Cheval's *Palais Idéal* and Raymond Isidore's *La Maison Picassiette* in France; Nek Chand's Rock Garden in Chandigarh, India; Helen Martins's Owl House in Nieu-Bethesda, South Africa; Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village in Simi Valley, California; and Richard Greaves's

anarchitectural structures, hidden in the countryside of Quebec. And then there are those who defy categorization, such as James Castle, James Harold Jennings, Alexander Lobanov, Luboš Plný, Ionel Talpazan, Melvin Way, and George Widener, among many others.

Madge Gill, *The Crucifixion of the Soul* (detail), commenced June 1, 1934. Black and colored inks on calico, 1 ⅞ x 17 ¼ feet (56 cm x 5.25 meters). Image and dimensions courtesy London Borough of Newham Heritage and Archives.

Howard Finster, *VISION OF A GREAT GULF ON PLANET HELL*, 1980. Enamel on plywood with painted frame, 35 ⅜ x 18 ⅝ in. (90 x 47.2 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum; gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr. (1988.74.5).

Sabato Rodia's towers in Watts, California. Photograph Seymour Rosen, May 1991. Courtesy SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments.

Ferdinand Cheval's Palais Idéal, Hauterives, France. Photograph Emmanuel Georges. Copyright Collection Palais Idéal, Emmanuel Georges.

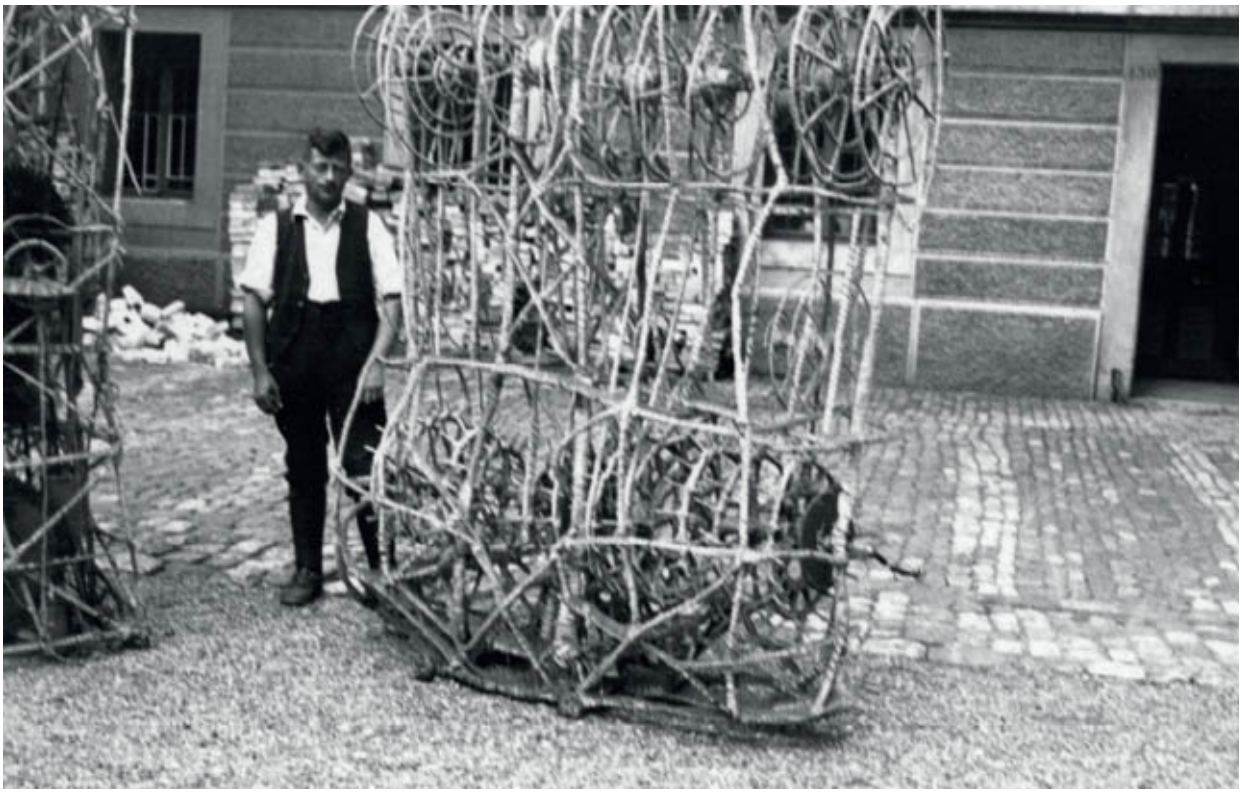
Unlike folk art, which is rooted in collective aesthetics and in the traditions of a particular community or subculture, outsider art is usually considered to be an expression of a uniquely personal vision that preoccupies the creator, who is often regarded as disconnected from the broader culture or community.[8] Most of the literature about outsider artists portrays them as self-taught individuals who create things with no regard for recognition or the marketplace. As described by Michel Thévoz, author of the book *Art Brut* and the former curator of the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland, outsider art "consists of works produced by people who for various reasons have not been culturally indoctrinated or socially conditioned. They are all kinds of dwellers on the fringes of society. Working outside the fine art 'system' (schools, galleries, museums and so on), these people have produced, from the depths of their own personalities and for themselves and no one else, works of outstanding originality in concept, subject and techniques. They are works which owe nothing to tradition or fashion. . . . [These artists] make up their own techniques, often

with new means and materials, and they create their works for their own use, as a kind of private theater. They choose subjects which are often enigmatic and they do not care about the good opinion of others, even keeping their work secret" (Thévoz, no date). Outsider art also has been defined by its qualities of originality and intensity, and described, often in breathless prose, as a truly inventive form of art that is "potent, evocative, provocative, intensely personal, unselfconscious, expressive, enigmatic, obsessive, vital, disquieting, brutal, subtle, exotic, close-to-the-ground, challenging" (David Steel, quoted in Manley, 1989: ix).[9]

Inside one of the structures at Tressa Prisbrey's Bottle Village in Simi Valley, California, early 1990s. Photograph Ted Degener.

Richard Greaves' anarchitectural house construction in a forest in Quebec, 2008. Photograph Peter Jan Margry and Daniel Wojcik.

Aloïse Corbaz, *Napoleon III at Cherbourg (The Star of the Paris Opera), (Napoléon III à Cherbourg [L'étoile de l'Opéra Paris])*, between 1952 and 1954. Colored pencil and juice of geranium on sewn-together sheets of paper, 64 ½ x 46 in. (164 x 117 cm). Photograph Claude Bornand. Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne.



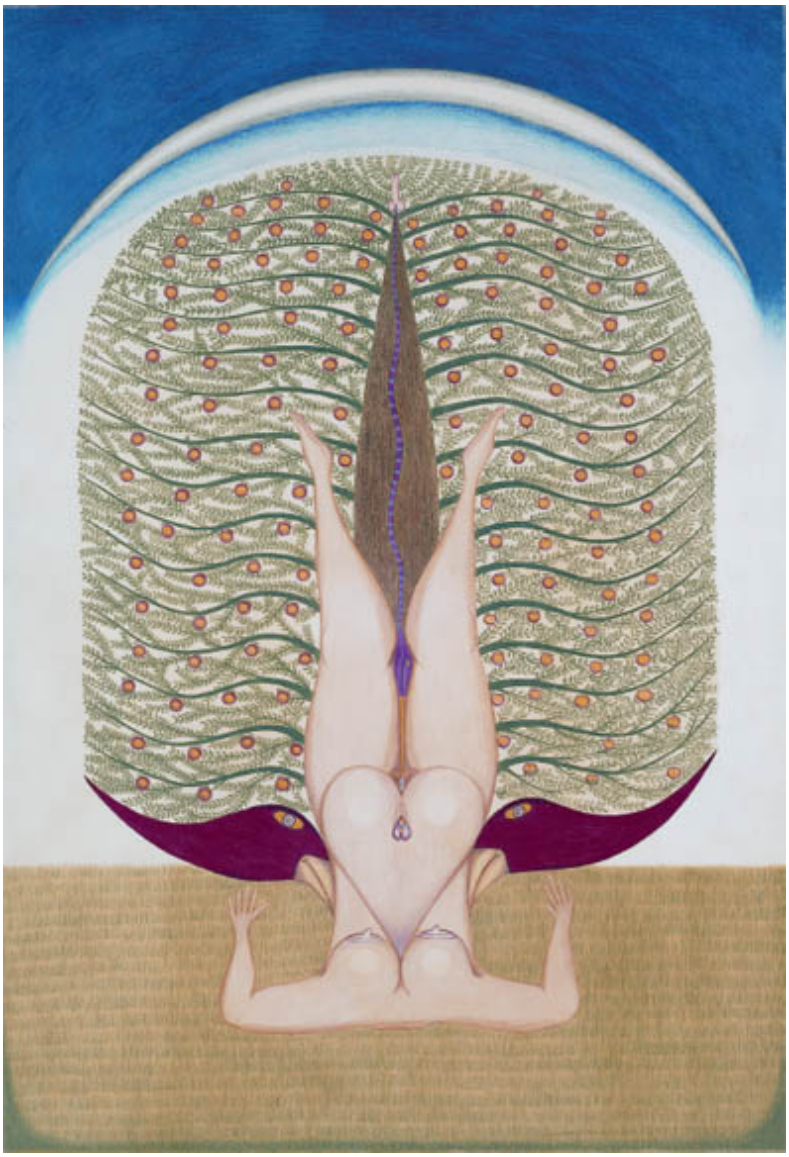
Heinrich Anton Müller, with machines he invented (whereabouts unknown), in the courtyard of the Münsingen Asylum, near Bern, Switzerland, c. 1914–1922, © Kunst-museum Bern, Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Psychiatrie.

The category of outsider art was not created by artists themselves, nor should one consider outsider art an artistic style or historical movement like Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, or Abstract Expressionism. Instead, it is a classification that has been defined and imposed upon individuals by collectors, art critics, and dealers. Those who have been labelled outsider artists seldom have contact with each other, and usually have little interest in defining their own work in such terms. Many so-called outsiders do not consider themselves artists at all, and they often make things for entirely personal reasons, whether in response to a traumatic event, for instance, or as an expression of a visionary experience. Such works, often created by individuals with no thought of financial gain or personal acclaim, have increasingly been introduced by others into the high-stakes realm of the professional art world, and may sell for tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of dollars at galleries and dealers' fairs. Major auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's now handle high-end outsider art; in March of 2011, for example, a drawing of the Virgin Mary on crinkled brown

butcher paper, made in a psychiatric hospital in the early 1950s by Martín Ramírez, was auctioned for more than $400,000, while a work created by the reclusive janitor Henry Darger sold for nearly $750,000 in December 2014, setting a record for outsider-art sales at the time.[10]

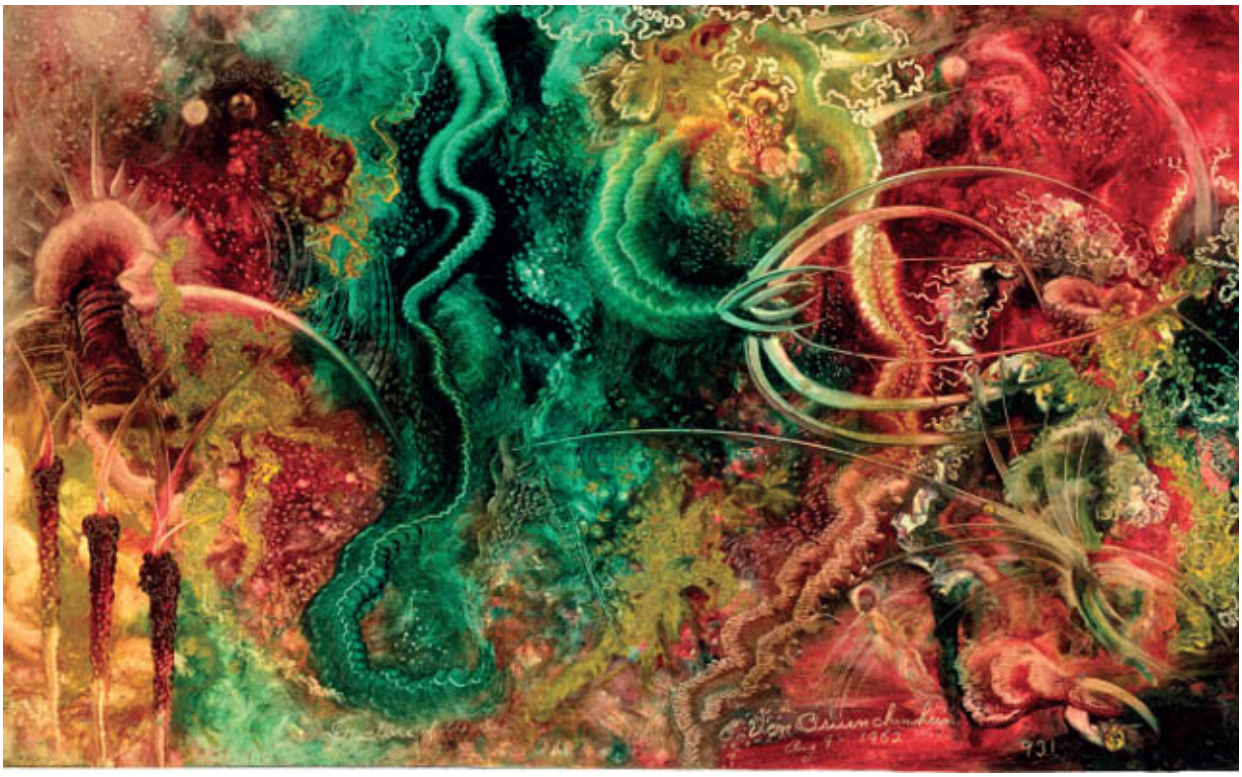
Connoisseurs of outsider art have their own preferences and criteria for those who should be included in the pantheon of outsider-art super-stars, but a sampling of those universally acclaimed as "masters" include Aloïse Corbaz (1886–1964), a Swiss governess who was institutionalized after developing a delusional infatuation with Kaiser Wilhelm II, and who scavenged found materials and created a color palate from crushed flower petals, toothpaste, and other substances to produce radiant scroll-like images of sensuous women and their romantic suitors in royal contexts; the psychiatric patient Heinrich Anton Müller (1869–1930), who had a psychological breakdown after his invention of a grapevine-pruning machine was stolen, and while hospitalized he created abstract drawings of strangely distorted human figures and odd creatures, as well as huge mechanical perpetual motion machines that were elaborately constructed with movable parts made from discarded materials and lubricated with his own excrement and bodily secretions; and Willem van Genk (1927–2005), a Dutch man diagnosed with psychosis who created intense travel scenes, train sculptures from debris, and fetishistic raincoats that he believed had protective powers. Of equal status in outsider-art circles are the beautiful fiber sculptures by the autistic artist Judith Scott (1943–2005), who created enigmatic cocoon-like objects woven with colored yarn and scraps of cloth; the surrealistic and sexually charged caricatures and death-infused picture poems by the petty criminal and vagrant street occultist Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern (1892–1982); the ornately wired and energy-filled "healing machines" constructed by the once itinerant hobo Emery Blagdon (1907–1986); and the work of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910–1983), who built thrones and crowns of chicken bones, produced photographic erotica of his wife and muse Marie, and created more than one thousand luminous finger paintings of apocalyptic landscapes, mushroom clouds, and intergalactic cityscapes. The obsessively detailed pencil drawings of the Polish shopkeeper Edmund Monsiel (1897–1962) are equally valued; traumatized by his experiences of Nazi occupation, Monsiel hid in an attic for the duration of the war, working by candlelight to create hundreds of intense and intricate images swarming with uncanny mustached faces, staring eyes, and religious figuration that he

continued to produce in secret for the last twenty years of his life. The art of Sava Sekulić (1902–1989), a Croatian of Serbian ethnicity, also emerged in response to life trauma—after a childhood of isolation and poverty, a World War I injury that left him blind in one eye, and the death of his wife and only child, he began creating an extraordinary pantheon of thousands of hybrid human-animals, bizarre figures, and folk-fantasy creatures. In the American context, Henry Darger (1882–1973) is considered the embodiment of the outsider-art phenomenon: abandoned and traumatized as a child, as an adult Darger, a quiet and reclusive janitor, lived alone in a small apartment in Chicago. There he secretly wrote a 15,145 page, single-spaced manuscript that describes the ongoing battle between the angelic and heroic Vivian Girls (little girls with male genitalia) and the brutal Glandelinians, who practice child enslavement. Darger illustrated this epic struggle, in some cases on scrolls twelve feet in width, with elaborate scenes of gruesome torture and slaughter as well as sentimental depictions of idyllic childhood bliss.



Friedrich Schröder-Sonnenstern, *The Practice* (*Die Praxis*), 1958. Colored pencil on paper, 39 ⅛ x 27 ½ in. (99.5 x 70 cm). Photograph Alistair Overbruck, Cologne, Germany. Courtesy Museum Charlotte Zander, Bönnigheim, Germany.

Emery Blagdon inside his shed with his healing machine constructions, Garfield Table, Nebraska, 1979. Photograph Sally and Richard Greenhill.



Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, *Untitled* (no. 931), 1962. Oil on paperboard, 17 ½ x 28 ½ in. (44.4 x 72.4 cm). © 2009 Rich Shapero. Used with permission. www.vonbruenchenhein.com

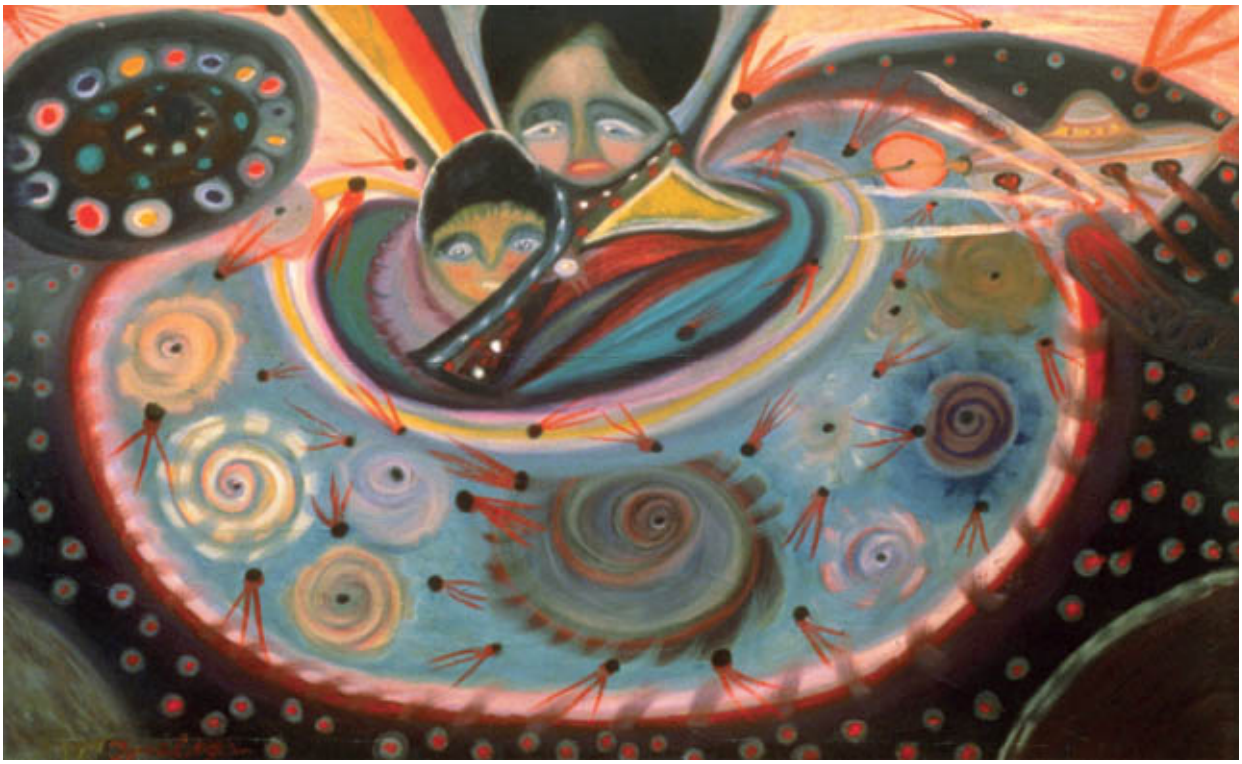
In recent years at the Outsider Art Fair in Manhattan and Paris, at the Slotin Folk Fest in Atlanta, at the Museum of Everything's travelling shows, at the Venice Biennale, and at dozens of other galleries and venues internationally, the variety of work on display has included art by the self-taught, the socially marginalized, and the religiously inspired, as well as that by memory painters, hobos, Holocaust survivors, Vietnam War veterans, refugees, prisoners, alleged UFO abductees, people with autism, and other individuals considered to be non-traditional, untrained, undiscovered, or non-mainstream. In addition to the compelling paintings and drawings by those individuals who are established in the outsider-art canon, the objects now included in the seemingly all-encompassing outsider-art category include tree-root sculptures, wire fetish objects, enigmatic doomsday calendars, folk pornography, illustrations of flying saucer visions, handmade dolls drenched in mud and blood, robots made from coffee pots, carved skateboards, erotic whirligigs, Haitian beaded flags, painted chewing gum, peach-stone carvings, outsider collage and photography, bottle cap art, illustrations of Jesus on recycled toilet-paper tubes, miniature embroidery

stitched out of sock thread, and the ink drawings of legendary tattoo artists.[11] This scattering of examples illustrates only a fraction of the hundreds of fascinating hand-made things now contained in the outsider-art world's cabinet of creative curiosities. Despite attempts to identify some recurrent features of outsider art (intensity, originality, unselfconscious, idiosyncrasy, compulsiveness, visionary impulse, obsessiveness, dense ornamentation, bricolage, repeated patterns and motifs), there is little, if anything, that unifies its creators except for the ways that they are viewed by dealers and collectors as marginal, unusual, or disconnected from mainstream society, creating art in an untutored way or singular style that is outside the dominant art-world paradigm and conventional understandings of art.[12]

Edmund Monsiel, *Untitled*, 1961. Pencil on paper, 10 ½ x 6 ⅞ (26.5 x 17.5 cm). Courtesy of abcd collection/Bruno Decharme, Paris.

Sava Sekulić, *The Man*, 1970. Mixed media on cardboard, 28 x 19 ⅞ in. (71 x 50.5 cm). Photograph Alistair Overbruck, Cologne, Germany. Courtesy Museum Charlotte Zander, Bönnigheim, Germany.

Henry Darger, *Untitled (Battle Scene during Lightning Storm, Naked Children with Rifles*), n.d. Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 24 x 74 ¾ in. (61 x 190 cm). Collection American Folk Art Museum, New York; gift of Nathan and Kiyoko Lerner (1995.23.1b). Photograph Gavin Ashworth, © Kiyoko Lerner.



Ionel Talpazan, *Father and Son in Space*, 1992. Oil on canvas, 36 x 58 in. (91.4 x 147.3 cm). Photograph James Wojcik.

The expression "outsider art" was popularized with the publication of art historian Roger Cardinal's influential book *Outsider Art* in 1972, the title of which was proposed as an English equivalent for the French term *art brut*, a

concept advanced by the modernist painter Jean Dubuffet in the 1940s and 1950s.[13] For Dubuffet (1901–1985), art brut ("raw art") was made by people free of formal artistic training, whose production was "untainted" by the culture of the academy and existed outside of or against cultural norms. Whereas the French connotation of *brut* as Dubuffet used it is "raw," "unfiltered," or "unadulterated and pure," for most English speakers it suggests "brute" or "brutal," and the word "outsider" was recommended as an alternative English equivalent. However, the term outsider art has now taken on a meaning and life of its own, often very different from the original intention of Cardinal, who followed Dubuffet's lead. In Dubuffet's view, art brut was an authentic form of expression that served as a critique of the pretentious and artificial nature of contemporary Western art. In the mid-1940s, he began collecting the art of psychiatric patients, spiritualist mediums, and other untrained and socially isolated individuals. In 1949, he offered the following definition of art brut: "We understand by this term works produced by persons unscathed by artistic culture, where mimicry plays little or no part. These artists derive everything—subjects, choice of materials, means of transposition, rhythms, styles of writing, etc.—from their own depths, and not from the conventions of classical or fashionable art. We are witness here to the completely pure artistic operation, raw, brut, and entirely reinvented in all of its phases solely by means of the artists' own impulses. It is thus an art which manifests an unparalleled inventiveness, unlike cultural art, with its chameleon and monkey-like aspects" (1988a [1949]: 33).

Surrealists such as André Breton, as well as other modernist artists, some of whom produced art that was influenced by the aesthetics (or anti-aesthetics) of art brut, embraced Dubuffet's ideas. Although Dubuffet later modified his views, acknowledging that being absolutely untouched by culture was impossible, the idea of "raw art" that was disconnected from society and cultural influences continues to pervade the discourse about outsider art. As art therapist David Maclagan observes, "Art brut has from the start been haunted by the image of a creativity that owes nothing to any external formation or encouragement, that seems to have emerged out of nowhere, independent of any tradition or cultural context. From Prinzhorn to Dubuffet, the assertion is repeatedly made that there is no apparent source, no obvious pedigree for them. . . . [They] appear out of the blue; instances of automatic creation that seem to constitute 'art without tradition'" (1997: 25).

As such, the extraordinary work of the psychiatric patient Martín Ramírez often has been offered as a prime example of raw creativity divorced from culture and tradition—the epitome of the outsider-art ideal.

Martín Ramírez, *Untitled* (*Madonna*), c. 1948–1963. Crayon and pencil on pieced paper, 79 x 41 in. (200.6 x 104 cm). Copyright Estate of Martín Ramírez.

Ramírez (1895–1963), immigrated to the United States from Mexico in 1925 to find work to support his family, but five years later, as a result of the Great Depression and other traumatic events, he was destitute and apparently homeless. Disoriented and unable to communicate in English (according to some accounts he had lost the ability to speak), Ramírez was arrested by

police in California's Central Valley and variously diagnosed with manic depression and "catatonic schizophrenia." In 1931, at the age of thirty-five, he was committed to a psychiatric hospital and spent the remaining thirty-two years of his life in mental institutions. In the mid-1930s he began to draw on a regular basis on pieces of scavenged scrap paper, candy wrappers, envelops, shopping bags, and flattened paper cups that he glued together with a paste made from saliva, oatmeal, chewed bread, or mashed potatoes. Using pencils and wooden matchsticks dipped in ink and colored liquids that he created from crayons, fruit juices, shoe polish, and saliva, he produced his drawings on the floor between the hospital beds or underneath a table, and then hid his works, away from the hospital staff who cleaned the wards of trash, confiscating the scribbles of patients in fear they were infected with tuberculosis from the inmates.[14] In 1948, Dr. Tarmo Pasto, a professor of psychology and art at Sacramento State College, visited Ramírez's ward and was impressed by his drawings and collages; Pasto encouraged him and brought him materials. Ramírez became more productive and began creating larger and more developed drawings and collaged pieces, with illustrations of trains, tunnels, horseback riders, female figures, landscapes, churches, and animals that were framed with mesmerizing decorative patterns and synchronized lines. Some of Ramírez's art was displayed in exhibits during the 1950s, but his work went largely unnoticed until the late 1960s, when his drawings were "rediscovered" by the artist Jim Nutt in storage bins at the college where he and Dr. Pasto taught, and then were subsequently acquired by Nutt and promoted by his art dealer, Phyllis Kind. In 2007, another discovery of more than 130 works by Ramírez, forgotten in a garage in California, created a frenzy of excitement in the outsider-art world. Ramírez's work is now among the most highly valued among outsider-art enthusiasts; according to some critics, his idiosyncratic and minimalist compositions compete with the best of contemporary art. His schizophrenia was the assumed source for the originality and the power of his work, his muteness and complete removal from culture and reality adding further to the aura and authenticity of his oeuvre.[15]

The narrative constructed about Martín Ramírez embodies the assumptions that inform the notion of the quintessential outsider artist: insane and unrestrained, the outsider enacts pure and genuine forms of untutored creativity, reaches beyond the bounds of culture and societal norms, remains oblivious to the deadening hegemony and the pretense of the

art world, and produces uniquely original works that evoke the tropes and qualities of the mystical. Such notions have an enduring romantic appeal and pervade broader concepts about authentic art and artists in general. Although a number of scholars and promoters acknowledge the problematic nature and inaccuracies of the outsider-art label and its associated assumptions, many seem to accept the criticisms with a shrug, apparently exhausted with the endless arguments that are regarded as passé or elitist by those dealers, collectors, and advocates invested in the category. The critiques, however, deserve further analysis.

Those who condemn the idea of outsider art argue that the term is alternately elitist, exclusionary, patronizing, racist, and dehumanizing, ultimately reinforcing notions of the "artist as Other"—and marking individuals as pathological or primitive in relation to normal people and culture.[16] Curator Joanne Cubbs's assessment encapsulates many of these criticisms: "Defined by their independence from the conventions or conformity of 'academic art,' the works of self-taught artists are, above all else, extolled for their uniqueness. Seeking to support this claim of originality, the writings on Outsider Art feature fantastic passages of formalist prose that marvel at the unusual creativity or intrinsic singularity of outsider expressions. The strange and ineffable aesthetic properties so assigned to Outsider Art soon dominate all other meaning as the already meager biographies of its makers are often turned into supporting tales of eccentricity and difference." Cubbs concludes, "It is in this relentless fetishizing of difference, in the exaggeration of the work's perceived singularity, and in the exploitation of the maker's often real-life marginalization that the originality of Outsider Art is constructed" (1994: 89).

Martín Ramírez, *Untitled* (Rosenquist Scroll), c. 1953. Crayon, pencil and collage on pieced paper, 51 x 18 in. (129.5 x 45.7 cm). Copyright Estate of Martín Ramírez.

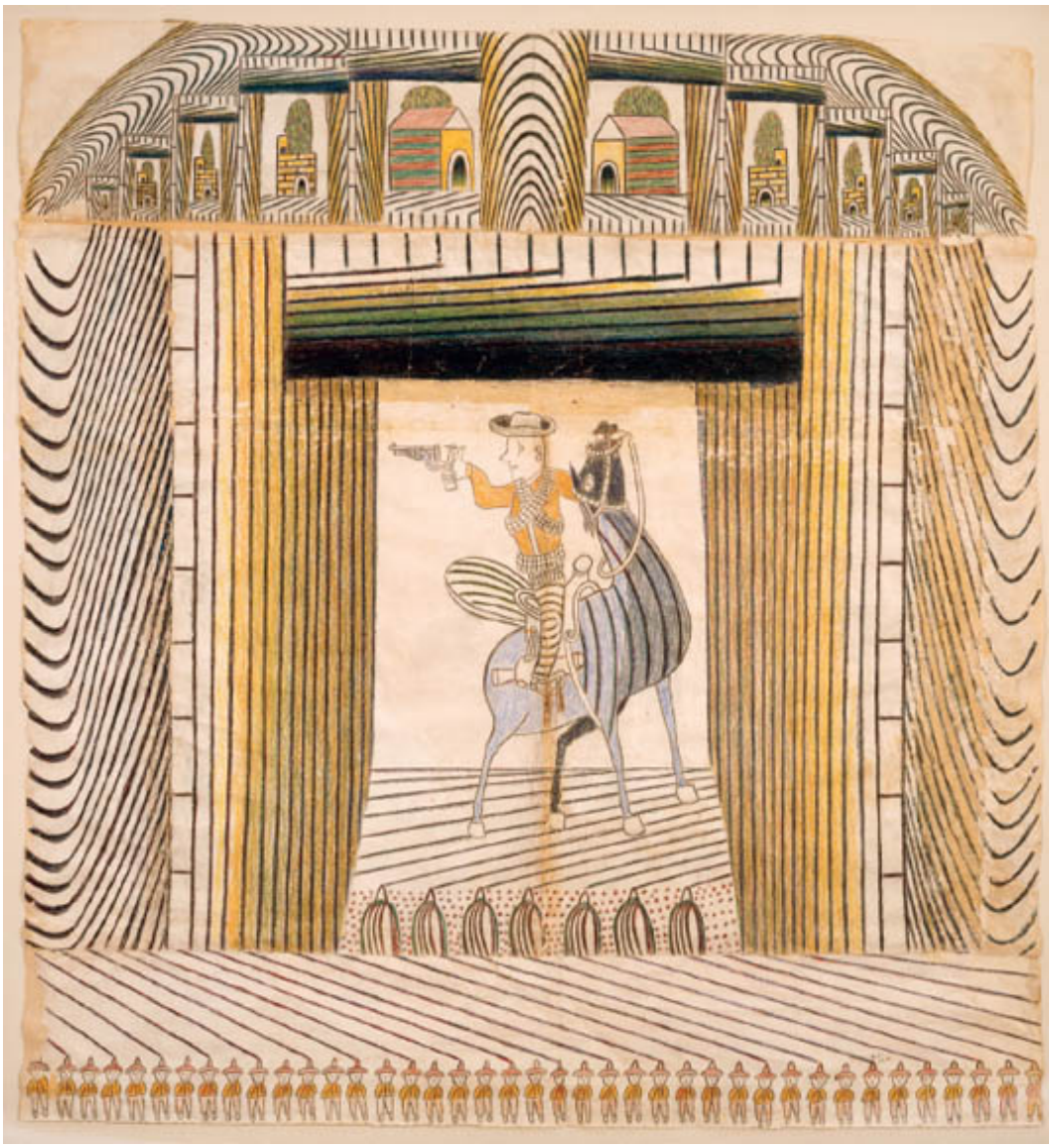
Many individuals labeled as outsiders are actually "insiders" within the context of their own communities, and they create art that draws upon common aesthetic and cultural traditions; but their ways of making things are unfamiliar and appear idiosyncratic to the urban and white-dominated community of outsider-art dealers, collectors, and writers. As will be discussed in chapter three, the mediumistic drawings of Spiritualists, the apocalyptic paintings of millennialists, the spirit-driven sacred art of Vodouists, and the visionary art of particular African American artists valued in outsider-art circles are rooted in religious traditions and vernacular

culture. The persistent notion of art detached from tradition and cultural influences is an illusion exposed and refuted throughout this book. To label the art of these individuals as "outsider" is not only inaccurate, but in regard to artists historically marginalized and oppressed because of their identities, the outsider tag—with its suggestions of mental illness, cultural deficiency, and other negative connotations—is particularly offensive, if not outright racist.[17]

Some of the problematic assumptions underlying the concept of outsider art are illustrated by the speculation about Martín Ramírez's art. Until recently, information about his life remained largely a gap in history. Outsider-art enthusiasts did not attempt to research or understand his past at length, nor acknowledge the varied cultural contexts that could have influenced his work. Formalistic approaches embraced him as a modernist, comparing him to Frank Stella, Paul Klee, and Edvard Munch; one writer even asserts that his imagery was borrowed from Walt Disney films. Neither assessment seriously considered Ramírez's Mexican cultural heritage; instead, they insisted Ramírez's art stemmed from a cultural void. The unusual visual perspectives of his art, and the hypnotic forms and unfamiliar images, were interpreted as a wild outgrowth of his schizophrenia. Consequently, his madness was imagined as a privileged mental state allowing him access to autonomous and perhaps archetypal imagery, channeled directly from the collective unconscious.

After decades of depersonalized conjecture about the mystery of Martín Ramírez, more recent scholarship by Víctor and Kristin Espinosa, Randall Morris, Brooke Davis Anderson, Daniel Baumann, and others confirms the cultural influences that should have been obvious from the start: Ramírez's masterful drawings were not summoned out of the thin air of the psychic elsewhere but are references to various vernacular traditions and folk Catholicism, a materialization of his memories and experiences creatively reconstructed in a visual narrative—artistic snapshots and thought-forms of his life in the Jalisco region of Mexico, his migration to the United States and his separation from his family and his culture, his work in the US, his subsequent incarceration, and his negotiation of a bicultural identity. His depiction of towns, landscapes, and churches are a visual correlate that recalls his life in Mexico and maps his journeys, from abstract scenes of his hometown and its local architecture to the tumult of his American episodes. The large-scale images of the strange woman with outstretched arms

standing on a globe with a snake beneath her feet is *La Purísima* (Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception), a common rendering of the Virgin Mary that was displayed in the church where Ramírez was married. The "bizarre" violin-playing skeleton is a rendition of well-known folk traditions of *Día de los Muertos* iconography. Ramírez's powerful images of trains exiting and entering tunnels, which especially excite those inclined to Freudian interpretation, seem to speak of his own travels and labor on the railroad and in the mines of Northern California; his iconic figures on horseback are not unconscious manifestations of universal archetypes but likely portraits of *vaqueros* (cowboys), *Zapatistos* and other Mexican revolutionaries, or perhaps the *jinete* involved in the Cristero Rebellion (a traumatizing civil war that alienated Ramírez from his family), or maybe even Ramírez himself, who was known as a skilled horseman back home.



Martín Ramírez, *Untitled (Horse and Rider)*, c. 1954. Crayon and pencil on pieced paper, 49 x 44 ½ in. (124.5 x 113 cm). Copyright Estate of Martín Ramírez.

Ramírez's supposed muteness has been recently refuted as well, with accounts of him speaking to hospital staff on occasion, and to a family member who visited him in the hospital. Tellingly, his diagnosis of schizophrenia is now in question too. Some researchers assert that the lack of proper care kept him hospitalized for life, but under modern medical protocols and with correct treatment, he would be an outpatient today. Handicapped by language barriers, destitute during the Great Depression, and having experienced some form of mental breakdown, he may have been misdiagnosed, institutionalized, and possibly given shock treatments, and

then incarcerated for the rest of his life during a time of anti-Mexican racism that filtered into the brutal psychiatric system of the time.[18] We will never know all the details of Ramírez's life or the exact meanings of his art, but the long overdue attention to biography and cultural contexts provides a more accurate understanding of his life and works while challenging the central and deterministic assumption: his art was necessarily the result of pathology and purely psychotic expression. As accurate scholarship replaces decades of depersonalized and romanticized misrepresentations, Ramírez is finally freed from the essentialist confines of the outsider-art category. His life and art are now more fully understood, and he is included in our world. He becomes an insider, not an outsider. His humanity and his remarkable mastery of techniques and perfection of artistic forms, combined with the imaginative power of his context-laden expressions, are reclaimed and renewed.

Alongside the decontextualized and formalist approaches that continue to pervade the descriptions of outsider art, some dealers and enthusiasts emphasize selected biographical anecdotes with an obvious tendency to embellish the eccentricity and outsider status of particular individuals, thus amplifying and celebrating a sense of their subject's raw creativity and rare authenticity. In some instances, dealers and writers have not only highlighted the artists' perceived madness or cultural isolation, but apparently have falsified biographical accounts as a strategy to promote and increase the monetary value of the art. As sociologist Gary Alan Fine (2004) discusses in his study of the subculture of outsider-art devotees and its community of collectors and dealers, outsider art is "identity art," often defined by the biography and stigma of its maker as well as the stories told about artists that help to sell the work. More than other types of art, outsider-art enthusiasm often has been fueled by the "collecting of people" marked by their perceived deviance from normality, as noted by art historian and curator Thomas Röske (2006: 19). As a result, personal hardship, insanity, or trauma may be emphasized or exaggerated to increase the appeal of the art, further contributing to the idea of otherness and authenticity as central traits of the outsider-art system. The importance of the story to such art is noted by art dealer Sanford Smith, the founder of the annual Outsider Art Fair in Manhattan, the major event in the outsider-art circuit: "From the prisoner who creates small embroidered paintings from the yarn in his sock, to the sharecropper in the south who paints or creates what he has in his head from God, [outsider art] is made by people who paint their fantasies, their horrors

and their wishes. . . . The exciting thing about the genre is people come and fall in love with the art, but they also fall in love with the story. Outsider art is wonderful for the novice collector because it's reachable and it has a real emotional response" (quoted in Morgan, 2012).

In reaction to the anecdotal storytelling, or perceived "story-selling" emphasis on the artist's biography, a number of curators, collectors, and scholars of outsider art now insist that critical conversations and appraisals remain steadfast and focused on the formal qualities of such work: outsider art must be able to "stand on its own" and be judged purely in terms of its aesthetic qualities, techniques, expressive character, and skillful use of materials. Thus, outsider art should be evaluated by the same criteria as contemporary art produced by formally trained art school graduates. As outsider-art commenter Edward M. Gómez confirms in his review of developments in the field, those who advocate a formalistic approach view it as a way to demonstrate that such "powerful works can hold their own alongside modern art's more familiar abstract icons. . . . Therein . . . lies the impulse for new waves of excitement about Outsider art and for the market that supports it, whose latest discoveries promise rewarding surprises" (2010b).

Inspired by and in dialogue with recent debates, scholarship, and international exhibitions, this book surveys the contested terrain of outsider art today, examines the assumptions that have fueled the interest in such art, provides a history and discussion of the primary issues in the field, and explores the interplay between culture and individual creativity that is at the very heart of definitions and debates about outsider art. Drawing upon interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives, this study challenges the recurrent assumptions about the isolation and idiosyncratic status of so-called outsider artists and contextualizes important forms of artistic expression by individuals who have been marginalized and misrepresented. In examining the lives and works of various well-known self-taught and outsider artists, the book illustrates the influence of vernacular culture, ethnic heritage, religious worldviews, social interactions, folk traditions, and popular culture central to the understanding of such art, yet often ignored by promoters of outsider art. Unlike outsider-art advocates attempting to sell, assess, or legitimate such art, this study does not concern itself with upholding a canon of master outsider artists, or invigorating the outsider-art market with new discoveries, or determining the status of such art as more or less

authentically art brut and outsiderish. No guidelines are offered for making aesthetic and collecting judgments; the imagined criteria for assessing the merit and value of outsider art have been provided by previous writers. The emphasis here on personal motivations, life experiences, and broader sociocultural contexts as they relate to the creative process is offered as a corrective to the ongoing barrage of depersonalized and romanticized portrayals of alleged outsider artists.

While some recent scholarship has paid more attention to the lives and motivations of individual artists within cultural contexts, formalistic approaches and abbreviated biographical descriptions stressing the individual's strangeness and distance from culture continue to dominate the discourse on outsider art. A formalistic emphasis on the aesthetic aspects and stylistic originality of outsider art may be useful in promoting and validating such art, but such an approach severs the art from those who make it, neglecting personal and cultural meanings. The pristine objectivity of formalism denies the voices of those individuals who create things and disrespects their specific reasons for doing so, negating the deeper meaning of the art while also divorcing individuals from their role in defining their art and identities. As art historian Kenneth Ames observes, such an approach is perhaps acceptable when applied to the work of elite artists who themselves embrace formalist values, but when this elitist mode is imposed on the art made by people in completely different contexts or cultures, it not only erases the actual purpose of the work but prevents an understanding of individuals and cultures through a stance that is dehumanizing, exploitative, and ethnocentric (1994: 267–268).

Michel Nedjar, *Untitled*, c. 1981. Sculpture of scrap rags and strings coated with mud, height 19 ½ in. (50 cm). Photograph Arnaud Conne, Atelier de numérisation—Ville de Lausanne, Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne.

Taya Doro Mitchell's decorated living room wall, Oakland, California, 2009. Photograph Jo Farb Hernández, courtesy of SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments.

In the alternative approach to representing outsider art, which stresses biography, the urge to mystify and fetishize often infects and distorts the depictions of individuals, resulting in embellished tales that highlight the oddness of the artist's life and emphasize a perceived distance from cultural meanings and contexts. In this repeated strategy of misrepresentation, outsider status is conferred through depictions of eccentricity, weirdness, deviance, and the individual's disconnection from history, society, and community. If mainstream art were viewed through the same lens, then the eccentricities of masters from Michelangelo to van Gogh, Rembrandt to Degas, would have them join the ranks of outsider artists.

A more humane and accurate understanding of those individuals classified as outsiders is offered by theorists of the aesthetic impulse such as Michael Owen Jones, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, and Ellen Dissanayake, who study human behavior and the nature of the creative process.[19] In particular, the methodology and analysis that Jones applies in his study of the

seemingly iconoclastic chairmaker Chester Cornett established the model for a humanistic and behavioral approach to artistic expression in the field of folklore studies.[20] In his analysis of Cornett and in his research with other artists, Jones examines the intricate relationship between individuals, their communities, and creativity. He attempts to understand the complexity and multiplicity of sources that contribute to art making, from the influence of vernacular traditions and the use of tools and technology, to customer influences, social contexts, and the life history of the individual. This perspective argues that those who study the artistic activities of individuals must consider not only the objects that people make in terms of their cultural contexts, but also the personal motivations for creating things (practical, sensory, therapeutic); the processes by which an individual conceptualizes and makes the object; the relation of personality, psychological states, and social interaction to artifacts; the associations, symbolic meanings, and use of objects; and the dynamics of the creative event itself.[21] In contrast to the romanticizing and marginalizing of individuals as isolated Others, this ethical and emic approach attempts to get inside the art of perceived outsiders and understand the creative process. By contextualizing the lives of those labeled as outsider artists, it reveals that they are often compelled by concerns and feelings that may affect us all.

Dr. Evermor (Tom Every), his wife Edith, and his Forevertron construction, the largest scrap-metal sculpture in the world, Sauk County, Wisconsin, early 1990s. Photograph Ted Degener.

In focusing on the life histories of self-taught and outsider artists, the present book also explores how experiences of tragedy and suffering have sometimes sparked the art-making process and triggered a creative transformation among some individuals. In surveying the literature of people described as outsiders, one notices a persistent theme of personal trauma, and in studying the lives of individual artists it is apparent that a number of them began creating art in response to adversity and personal crisis. In some instances, the creative process seems to have helped people confront and cope with traumatic life events, sometimes in transformative ways. Holocaust survivor Rosemarie Koczÿ, for instance, used art as a way to address her horrifying experiences in German concentration camps; her haunted drawings express her own suffering and also memorialize those who were killed in the camps. French artist Michel Nedjar's art also began as a response to the horrors of the Holocaust and his own feelings of loss. During a two-year period of depression, Nedjar began making dolls from old cloth bathed in mud and blood, discovering that the process of creating things was therapeutic: "The dolls saved me" (quoted in Danchin, 2007: 39). After a

series of family tragedies and deaths of friends, former New Jersey police sketch artist Kevin Sampson began making sculptures from found objects as a way to work through his grief and memorialize family members and others. José María Garrido García dealt with his sorrow after witnessing his fishing partner drown in an accident by creating a memorial museum for his friend, built out of sea shells and other found objects (Hernández, 2013: 106–119). In an act of self-therapy, Taya Doro Mitchell spent years decorating the interior of her home in Oakland, California, with hundreds of thousands of colorful recycled objects, creating a jewel-like haven that provided emotional comfort as she cared for her dying husband. Salvage worker Tom Every says that he began constructing his enormous scrap metal Forevertron environment in Wisconsin during a period of depression as a way to transform destructive feelings into something creative and positive. In a similar manner, Dutch bricoleur Petra Heyboer created assemblages and transformed her home into an entire art environment, the creative process helping her mitigate feelings of depression and hopelessness. For Mr. Imagination (Gregory Warmack), his majestically constructed thrones, sculptures, and outfits created from bottle caps and other recycled objects were directly related to his experience of being robbed and shot on the street, and he viewed his art as a means of turning traumatic experiences into healing and celebration through the creative transformation of cast-off things.

Mr. Imagination (Gregory Warmack) and his bottle-cap throne, with other sculptures in his home, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 2005. Photograph Ted Degener.

Carlo Zinelli, *Untitled*, 1962. Watercolor on paper, 13 ¾ x 19 ⅝ in. (35 x 50 cm). Photograph Olivier Laffely, Atelier de numérisation—Ville de Lausanne, Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne.

Notions of trauma have been associated with the phenomenon of art brut from its inception, as traumatic experiences marked the lives of many individuals identified by Jean Dubuffet as exemplars of art brut creativity as well as others who are now categorized as classic outsider artists. A well-known case is that of the Italian painter Carlo Zinelli (1916–1974), one of Dubuffet's favored artists, who experienced tragedy, loss, and deprivation from an early age. After his mother died when he was two years old, Zinelli spent much of his childhood alone, and then at the age of nine he was sent away to work as a farmhand. In his early twenties, he volunteered for the Spanish Civil War, but after two months he had a mental breakdown and was then hospitalized periodically from 1941 to 1947. Zinelli suffered from terrifying hallucinations and feelings of persecution, and in 1947 he was permanently committed to the San Giacomo alla Tomba Psychiatric Hospital in Verona with a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. He spent the next ten

years in near total isolation, unable to communicate verbally, speaking only in nonsensical syllables and neologisms. During this time he began scratching graffiti on a courtyard wall with bricks and nails. In 1957, after an art studio was established at the hospital, Zinelli began to paint, eight hours each day, continuing to do so for the next fourteen years, a routine that calmed him over time. Through his striking and rhythmically patterned compositions, populated with rows of silhouetted figures (often with holes in their heads or bodies), as well as animals, soldiers, vehicles, geometric images, and other symbols, he created a lexicon that recalled his personal history and attempted to communicate in visual form what he could not express verbally. It was the uncanny strangeness, born from debilitating trauma, found in the work of Zinelli and other psychiatric patients such as Corbaz, Müller, and Adolf Wölfli that Dubuffet celebrated as forms of anticultural creativity, authentic and raw expressions free from art-world clichés and bourgeois cultural conventions.

The underlying experience of trauma shared by the artists included in Dubuffet's Collection de l'Art Brut is noted by its former director Lucienne Peiry, who observes that if anything unifies art brut creators, it is their humble background, rudimentary instruction, and most importantly some type of devastating traumatic experience harbored within: "Each one carried inside them an existential fracture resulting from a shock or a conflict of some sort. . . . They never got over these experiences and became perpetually exiled internally. . . . They glimpsed only one way out: the creation of an imaginary world where nothing could affect them" (2001: 135–136). Clearly trauma was interlocked in the lives of the psychiatric patients whose art comprises the Prinzhorn Collection at Heidelberg University in Germany, a primary source for Dubuffet's notions of art brut; when I asked the director of the collection, Thomas Röske, about specific artists in the collection who were particularly traumatized, he replied without hesitation, "All of them."[22]

While accounts of trauma are prevalent in the biographies of many individuals labeled outsider artists, there is not a simple relationship between trauma and creativity, and the personal reasons and routes to artistic activity are numerous and vary widely. Sometimes the path to creativity is stumbled upon accidently and artistic endeavors are triggered in seemingly inexplicable ways. The rural postman Ferdinand Cheval tripped over a stone one day during his postal route; he found the strange shape of the rock so

fascinating that it triggered the impulse in him to construct his monumental Ideal Palace, a thirty-three year project. Sabato Rodia was building a mosaic fence one afternoon and became so engrossed in the creative process that he forgot his craving for liquor. He later declared that the process of creativity cured him of his alcoholism. For Nek Chand, gathering recycled debris and stones and then building his Rock Garden helped him address painful memories of forced migration, allowing him to symbolically reconstruct a destroyed and traumatized past. In some cases, making art deters forces that might otherwise destroy individuals. Vietnam veteran Gregory Van Maanen began to paint and sculpt in order to deal with both the horrific memories of the war and his ongoing struggles with posttraumatic stress disorder. He describes his art making as "a suicide prevention program," a form medicine and self-preservation (quoted in Rafferty, 2009). After the tragic deaths of family members, creative expression became a source of solace and meaning for the self-taught artists Lonnie Holley, Mary Proctor, and Myrtice West, while for Anne Marie Grgich and Ody Saban, the trauma of terrible car accidents and other difficult life experiences significantly affected their art. For Willem van Genk, creating things was a way to survive the daily ordeals of mental illness and control forces that threatened to manifest psychotic episodes. His art did not heal him, but it helped him cope with a world that he found hostile and threatening, providing a sense of protection and fortifying his own strength to persevere.

Gregory Van Maanen, *Untitled*, 2009. Acrylic on board, 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm). Courtesy Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York.

In some instances, art that begins as a response to personal adversity grows beyond the individual and extends into the community in transformative ways. Tyree Guyton started to create art as a way to deal with the abuse and neglect he experienced as a child. As he expanded his Heidelberg Project into a form of street art that protested the collapse of his neighborhood in the inner city of Detroit, he transformed his street from a blighted and dangerous ghetto into an internationally recognized art environment, generating a grassroots type of urban renewal. In a similar manner, Nek Chand's secretive and illegal art project grew over time into a

twenty-five-acre environment that was ultimately embraced by his fellow citizens of Chandigarh, India. As an alternative to the alienating modernist architecture of the city, Chand's folk environment resonates with a powerful and inclusive cultural meaning, offering a restorative effect on the broader community.

Willem van Genk, *Tube Station*, 1970. Mixed media and collage on paper, 29 ½ x 48 ¾ in. (75 x 124 cm). Photograph Atelier de numérisation—Ville de Lausanne. Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne.

Tyree Guyton and one of his transformed houses, Heidelberg Project, Detroit, early 1990s. Photograph Ted Degener.

Many other examples exist of individuals who have discovered the creative process as a way to deal with tragedies and traumatic events, and taken together these accounts reveal a common historical and cross-cultural creative response: individuals, with little or no artistic training, often undergo a personal transformation and discover the artistic process as the result of a profound crisis or traumatic event. The personal experiences of tragedy, hardship, or a life-changing event that ignite the creative process are diverse, including the death of a child or other loved one, the horrors of war, internment, assault, rape, immigration or cultural dislocation, illness, mental or physical disability, depression, poverty, prejudice, loss of a job, loneliness, and social ostracism.[23] In these instances, adversity does not mechanistically "produce" creativity; instead, individuals engulfed by suffering sometimes transform themselves, and creative impulses are catalyzed and emerge. For reasons that are unique to the specific life

experiences of individuals, people with no artistic training discover the artistic process and draw upon their own abilities to be creative in an effort to structure or reframe pain, deal with grief and loss, and by doing so gain a sense of emotional stability and restored meaning in their lives.

While ideas about the connection between suffering, tragedy, mental distress, and art making permeate conceptualizations of outsider art, assumptions about the therapeutic aspects of creativity weave throughout the scholarship and promotional materials that describe outsider artists. The history of the genre, rooted in the art of the mentally ill, is infused with an ambiguous discourse of trauma, suffering, and the possible therapeutic aspects of artistic behavior among psychiatric patients and non-institutionalized others. The connection between personal torment and creativity is approached with caution in this book, since such discourse often conveys clichéd and over-romanticized notions about the suffering artist as "tortured genius." This archetype continues to pervade the popular imagination and uphold the cult of madness and creativity, a notion exemplified by the adoration of the well-known patron saints of art and insanity—Vincent van Gogh and Antonin Artaud. Focusing on personal suffering and trauma in this study might seem to perpetuate these ideas about tormented outsiders and reinforce the stereotype that authentic art is somehow interwoven with suffering. But the alternative perspective advocated here interrogates such assumptions, and attempts to understand suffering and acknowledge the ways that people confront adversity as a part of the human experience that everyone encounters to some degree.

View of Nek Chand's Rock Garden, Chandigarh, India. Courtesy Nek Chand Foundation, UK.

Not all art comes from sorrow or pain, and suffering is not necessarily a cause of creativity. Art making is not inherently therapeutic, or teeming with an inevitable healing function. In some cases, the process of creating things may increase one's suffering, evoke painful memories, intensify mental illness, and reproduce trauma in harmful ways. The perspective offered here contextualizes individual suffering and trauma and explores the ways that people try to cope with problems, adjust to stressful situations, and express meaning in their lives through creativity. To reiterate: suffering and trauma are not prerequisites for self-taught creativity. Many individuals labeled as outsider artists did not begin to create because of suffering or adversity, just as most people who experience some crisis or a traumatic event do not suddenly begin to create things. In some instances, however, individuals who encounter a life-changing crisis may discover a hidden artistic talent or impulse and realize that the creative process helps them deal with hardship, or serves as a form of solace, or sometimes transforms trauma into healing. As will be illustrated, certain self-taught artists themselves have remarked on the therapeutic aspects of creativity as a motivation for or a result of making

art, whether related to traumatic life events, grief over the loss of a loved one, or the stress of a disruptive life crisis. A number of these artists have said that verbalizing traumatic events, and the emotions they evoke, is difficult or impossible. But through the materialization of memory and metaphor in art, individuals create images and objects that represent experiences and emotions often too painful and anxiety-producing to express in words. As Michael Owen Jones tells us, "Representing issues in material form redirects inner feelings outward onto an external form. Making things can distract one from the pain, refocusing attention and energy, or even resolve issues and restore a sense of self worth. The outcome of art's therapy is not just the creation of an object, but the rebuilding of a person" (2006: 71).

The next chapter examines the origins of outsider art, as well as the concept of art brut, notions about insanity and art, trauma, and the development of the idea of art making as a form of therapy in greater depth. Chapter three explores how religious visionaries, trance mediums, and divinely inspired individuals create art that becomes configured as outsider or "visionary," a primary category within the outsider-art spectrum. The spiritual traditions and religious contexts that influence such art often have been ignored or presented in superficial ways. Chapter four discusses another significant category in the outsider-art compendium, focusing on the lives and experiences of those individuals who have single-handedly built large-scale art environments from salvaged debris and recycled materials. Whether such constructions are celebrated as eccentricities or condemned as eyesores, these vernacular environments have more connections to folk traditions and local culture than scholars and other observers have generally acknowledged.

An awareness of the apparent therapeutic aspects of art making among the mentally ill led to the "discovery" of art brut and outsider art as a phenomenon and contributed to the rise of the field of art therapy. The final chapter of this book, therefore, revisits ideas about trauma, therapy, and the creative process within the field of outsider art today, as experienced and expressed by specific individuals who have been labeled outsiders and visionaries. The idea of trauma haunts outsider-art studies as an enduring trope that is used to imbue individuals and their art with an aura of authenticity. Anecdotes and incidents of human suffering and adversity pepper the narratives used to market the artwork as genuine, deeply

personal, and marked by the stigmata of traumatic life events. While this discourse of suffering and trauma has been used as a marketing device, a number of individuals do indeed describe the connection of their art making to life crises and personal pain, and their views on creativity and hardship are presented in chapter five. The complex relationship between art, grief, and trauma and the possible therapeutic aspects of art making are explored within the larger concern and objective of this study. The aim of this book is to provide an expanded understanding of the lives, artistic behavior, cultural matrix, and social realities of those individuals labeled as outsiders, and in doing so, allow them to speak for themselves.

Chapter 2

Between Madness and Art

Insanity, Therapy, and the Origins of Outsider Art

> True art always appears where we don't expect it, where nobody thinks of it or utters its name. Art detests being recognized and greeted by its own name. . . . As soon as it is divulged or pointed out, it flees and leaves in its place a glorified bit-player carrying on its back a large poster marked ART; everyone immediately sprinkles it with champagne, and lecturers lead it from town to town with a ring through its nose. This is the false Monsieur Art. He is the only one known by the public, since he bears the poster and the laurel.
>
> **—Jean Dubuffet** (1949)

Influenced by Hans Prinzhorn's 1922 *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, Jean Dubuffet was the most vocal early advocate of the idea of "raw art," uncooked by culture and unscathed by the contaminating influences of the mainstream art world. A struggling painter living in Paris after the end of World War II, Dubuffet, like other modernist artists, rebelled against the canon of Western art. He searched for inspiration in non-European and non-academic works of art, including folk art, art from Africa and Oceania, and children's art. Despite the embedded racism that seems so clear to us in the twenty-first century, the avant-garde's romanticization of "primitivism," the exotic, the irrational, and the non-Western Other drove Dubuffet to look for the Other within his own culture. He traveled throughout Switzerland in 1945 to observe firsthand the artwork being produced by patients in psychiatric

hospitals. He was struck by the originality and emotional power of the works he saw, sparking what would become a lifetime crusade to collect and study those forms of art which he regarded as original, spontaneous, and uninfluenced by culture, made by individuals with little artistic training or contact with galleries, art schools, and the concomitant ideas and institutions of the art world. Although many of these individuals were patients in psychiatric wards, others were mediums involved in the Spiritualist movement, isolated autodidacts, and assorted social outcasts. Dubuffet sought out works he judged to be striking, shocking, or disturbing: authentic art that he believed to be uncorrupted by dominant cultural and artistic influences.

Dubuffet positioned himself as a provocateur and an enemy of high culture. In polemical, anticultural texts such as *Asphyxiating Culture*, he condemns the art of museums, and Western cultural aesthetics in general, while extolling the genuine creativity of ordinary people: "It may be that artistic creation, with all that it calls for in the way of free inventiveness, takes place at a higher pitch of tension in the nameless crowd of ordinary people than in the circles that think they have the monopoly of it. It may even be that art thrives in its healthiest form among these ordinary people, because it is practiced without applause or profit, for the maker's own delight; and that the over-publicized activity of professionals produces merely a specious from of art, all too often watered down and doctored. If this were so, it is rather cultural art that should be described as marginal" (1995: 5). Over the years, Dubuffet refined his ideas and developed his assaults aimed at the cultural art of the establishment while amassing a vast collection of thousands of art brut works produced by people who had no connection to the concerns and traditions of the contemporary art world. Regarded by Dubuffet as pure and powerful, intense, and unique, the works were deemed to express an imaginative inner world, described by Roger Cardinal as "the psychic elsewhere" (1992: 95). In 1948, Dubuffet established the Compagnie de l'Art Brut, an organization devoted to collecting and preserving such art, whose more than sixty members at one time included such luminaries as André Breton, Jean Cocteau, Albert Camus, Tristan Tzara, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. In addition to building his extensive collection, he organized various exhibitions of the works he discovered, which became the basis for what is known as the Collection de l'Art Brut, now permanently housed in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Dubuffet's tireless campaign established art brut as a category of powerful artistic activity; in doing so, his ideas continue to validate the discourse defining marginalized Others and the mentally ill as embodiments of authentic, fertile, and primal creativity.

While Dubuffet was the most influential figure in the invention of the concept of art brut outsiders, the earlier origins of outsider art may be traced to the rise of asylums as social institutions in the nineteenth century. This development, coupled with an emerging interest in the art of the insane, gave rise to the Romanticist view of madness as a condition that provided access to uninhibited creativity. The relationship of art to madness has been a subject of speculation for more than two thousand years. Greek philosopher Plato, for instance, asserted that the artist was touched with a "divine madness" from the gods, while his student Aristotle associated creativity with melancholia and mania.[1] In the *Phaedrus*, Plato famously declares, "If a man comes to the door of poetry untouched by the madness of the Muses, believing that technique alone will make him a good poet, he and his sane compositions never reach perfection, but are utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman" (Plato, 1973: 48). Such ideas found full expression during the Romantic Movement of the later eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The Romantics emphasized the value of subjectivity, self-expression, and heightened emotional states, and they equated madness with genius; they thus imagined insanity as a liberating state freeing the artist from the binding strictures of rationalism and social convention. As John MacGregor notes in *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, "Madness held within it the promise of new and unexplored realms of the imagination, and the Romantic artist constantly seems to have felt that another world lay just inches away, that he was separated from it by the thinnest of membranes, and that some sudden turn of the mind could lead him, all unresisting, into this unexplored, and vastly more real, reality" (1989: 76). As ideas about madness and artistic genius permeated cultural discourse during the nineteenth century, a concurrent interest in the artistic activities of the mentally ill also arose.

During the same era, as Michel Foucault argues in *Madness and Civilization*, the rise of the psychiatric profession and the proliferation of the disciplinary institution of the asylum during the nineteenth century produced large and often permanent populations of the mentally ill, as well as a new distinct class—a profession of asylum doctors.[2] Tens of thousands of

individuals were diagnosed as insane and incarcerated in prison-like environments, isolated from society and often subjected to inhumane treatment. In these abject contexts, asylum doctors began to observe the artistic productions of interned patients, as some individuals spontaneously created things in these captive conditions. Most of these works were promptly destroyed, but some European psychiatrists began to examine the drawings of their patients, considering them to be pictorial analogues of mental diseases. Although such drawings were sometimes collected and studied in diagnostic ways, or used for teaching and psychological analysis, the possible therapeutic value of art to its maker remained largely unexplored. This was largely due to the fact that during the later half of the nineteenth century, the dominant medical view of mental illness regarded it as the result of brain abnormality, and thus clinical treatment emphasized the physiological treatment of the brain rather than a focus on psychological or art therapies. Consequently, doctors increasingly administered medication as well as invasive physical forms of psychosurgery, and isolated the mentally ill in asylums.[3]

A significant early study of the possible connection between creativity and mental illness is *L'uomo di genio* (*Man of Genius*, 1888; initially published in 1864 as *Genio e follia* [*Genius and Madness*]), by Cesare Lombroso, who based his analysis on his collection of psychiatric art from more than one hundred patients. Lombroso (1835–1909), often called the father of scientific criminology, argued that artistic genius was a type of insanity, an atavistic "degenerative psychosis," a mental condition that should not be valorized in the vogue of Romanticist fashion. Although his speculative findings concerning the connection between psychopathology and genius were later rejected, his work did contribute to a broader interest in the art of the mentally ill. Unfortunately, the clichéd link between matters of genius and madness, one of his long-repudiated ideas, persists in the popular imagination to this day. In contrast to Lombroso, a less judgmental approach to the art of psychiatric patients appeared two decades later in the form of *L'art chez les fous* (*Art by the Mad*), published in 1907 by the French psychiatrist Paul Meunier, who wrote under the pseudonym Marcel Réja. Rather than offer diagnostic analysis, this study emphasized aesthetic aspects of patients' work. Although Réja concluded that the art of the insane was "primitive" in style and bore a resemblance to the art of children and "savages," he did not view it as pathological, as Lombroso had argued.

Instead, he suggested that such art represented an "elemental" or "embryonic form of art" that might contribute to an understanding of the more complex masterpieces of "great artists," as well as provide insights into the origins of the artistic impulse. "The systematic study of the work of the insane touches on an essential point: they illuminate with unique clarity the conditions governing the genesis of artistic activity. . . . It is in insanity, perhaps, that this genesis is to be recognized in its purest form" (Réja, 1907: 18, 16, 231; MacGregor, 1989: 173–174).[4]

In the early 1920s, two pioneering works on the art of the mentally ill were published that have had a lasting influence on the study and conceptualization of outsider art: Hans Prinzhorn's *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (1922), and Walter Morgenthaler's *A Psychiatric Patient as Artist* (1921). These studies moved beyond a mere diagnostic analysis of drawings and explored both the artistic achievements of individuals with mental illnesses and the nature of artistic expression itself. Largely overshadowed by the art brut polemics of Dubuffet and other advocates of outsider art, these two studies have nonetheless influenced assumptions about artist outsiders while drawing attention to the potentially therapeutic aspects of the creative process.

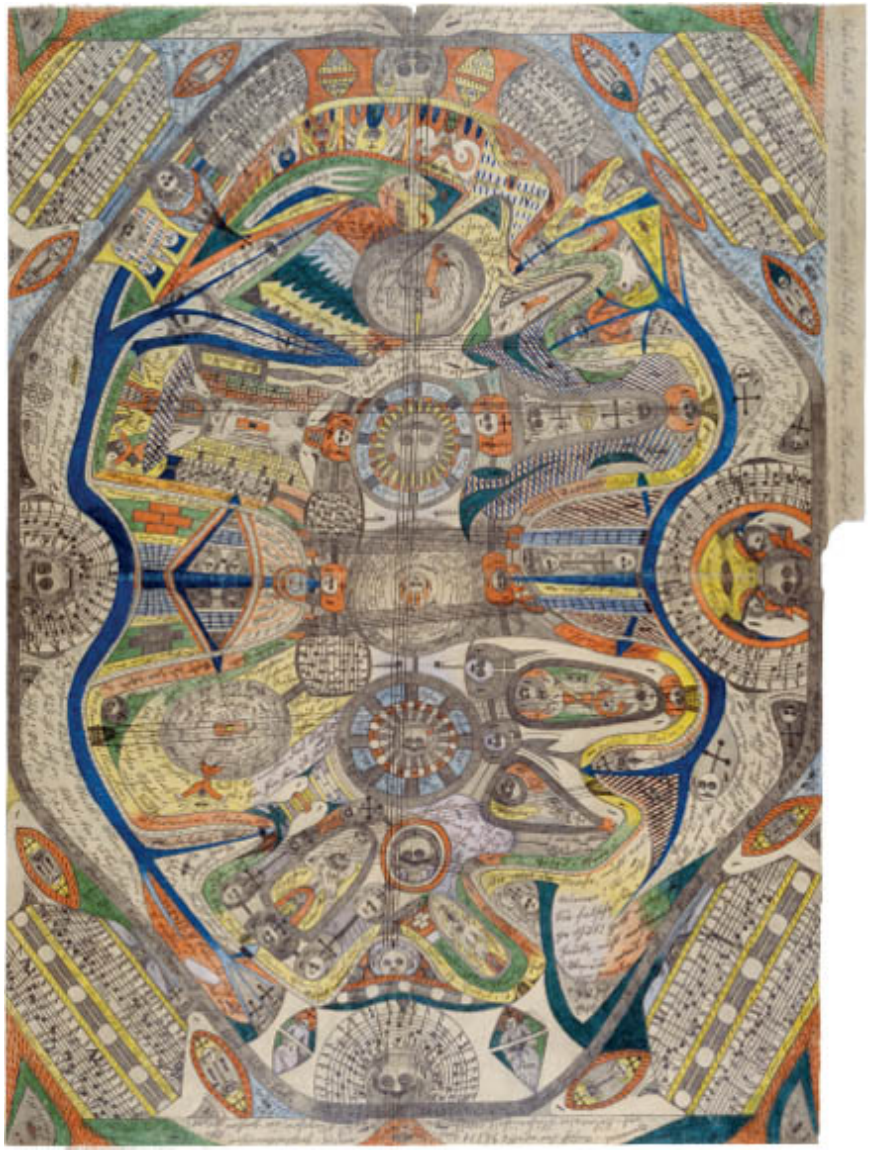
Adolf Wölfli: A Psychiatric Patient as Artist

Morgenthaler's 120-page monograph focused on the extraordinary art of one of his patients, Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930). Institutionalized at the age of thirty-one as a schizophrenic, Wölfli spontaneously began to create intricate drawings, producing thousands of pages of illuminated manuscripts in his cell in a mental asylum. The volume published by Morgenthaler (1882–1965) in 1921 was the first in a series of books on applied psychiatry that would later include the psychologist Hermann Rorschach's *Psychodiagnostik*, which popularized the Rorschach inkblot test as a diagnostic tool to be used by psychiatrists. Rorschach and Morgenthaler shared an interest in the art of the mentally ill and were colleagues at the Waldau Mental Asylum in Bern, Switzerland, from 1914–1915. While Rorschach's ideas swept through psychiatric circles, Morgenthaler's book on Wölfli had a more gradual influence, primarily among artists, the Surrealists in particular. After learning about Wölfli's art, Surrealist poet and theorist

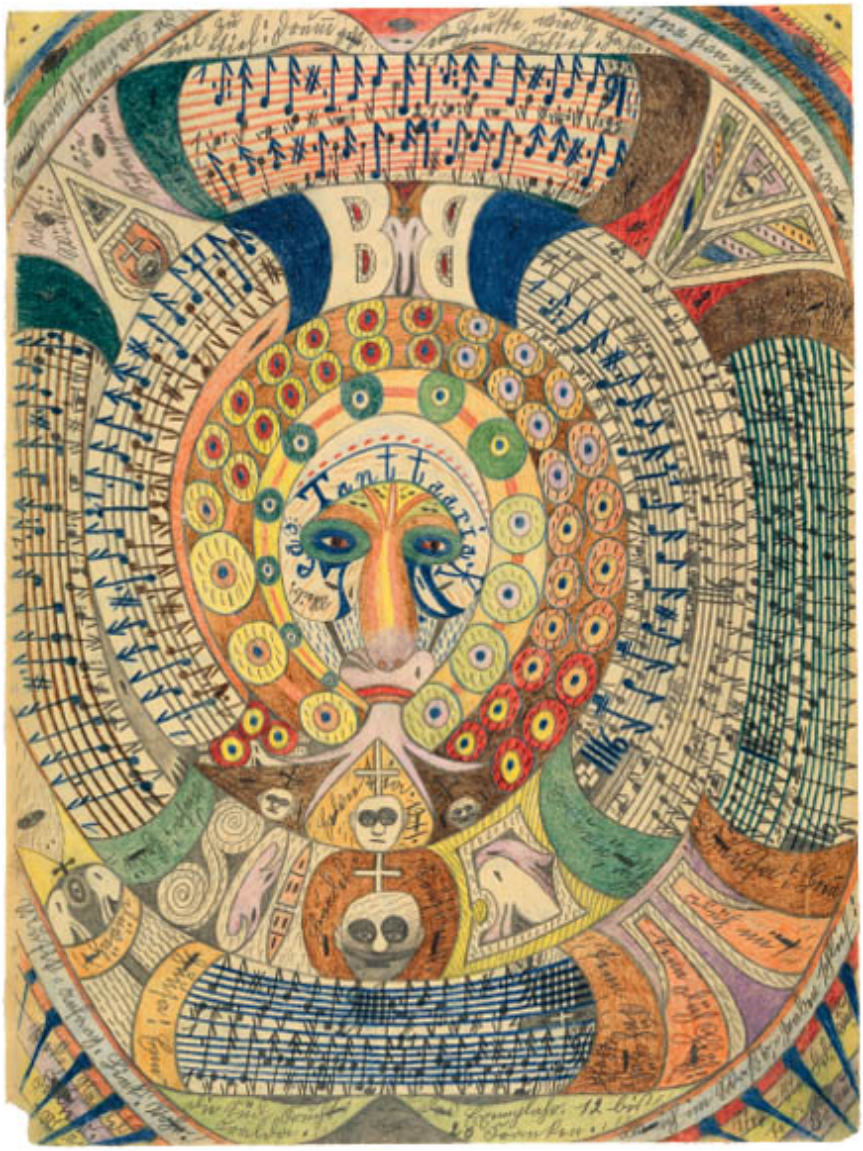
André Breton described his work as “one of the three or four most important oeuvres of the twentieth century” (Spoerri, 1997: 217).

Morgenthaler’s account of Wölfli’s life, characterized by trauma, deviance, and madness, became a prototype for the image of the outsider artist: Wölfli was born into a poor Swiss family, the youngest of seven children, and his childhood was characterized by abuse, neglect, and extreme poverty. When he was five years of age, his alcoholic father abandoned the family, and two years later Wölfli was separated from his mother, who died the following year. He spent the next seven years of his life working as a child hireling and forced laborer, sometimes under brutal and abusive conditions. During this time, he fell in love with a girl whose father, a wealthy farmer, intervened and prohibited the romance because of Wölfli’s low social status. As Wölfli describes in his notes, the event shattered him, and it seemed to haunt him for the rest of his life. He spent a brief time in the military, experienced ongoing periods of depression and violent behavior, and endured several other unfulfilled romantic relationships. On two occasions in 1890, he attempted to embrace and sexually assault young girls, for which he was imprisoned for two years. Upon his release, he worked as a laborer until he was institutionalized at the age of thirty-one after he was convicted of attempting to molest a three-year old girl. Diagnosed as a schizophrenic, Wölfli was committed to the Waldau Psychiatric Asylum, where he spent the remaining thirty-five years of his life.[5]

Adolf Wölfli, *The Sorbanda-Snake or Ria-Arattrika, Australia*, 1911. In *From the Cradle to the Grave*, Book 4, p. 359. Pencil and color pencil on newsprint, 19 ⅝ x 14 ¾ in. (49.9 x 37.5 cm). Courtesy Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland.



Adolf Wölfli, *General View of the Island Neveranger*, 1911. In *From the Cradle to the Grave*, Book 4, p. 257. Pencil and color pencil on newsprint, 39 ¼ x 28 in. (99.8 x 71.2 cm). Courtesy Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland.



Adolf Wölfli, *Lea Tanttaaria*, 1910. Pencil and colored pencil on newsprint, 19 ½ x 14 ⅝ in. (49.7 x 37.2 cm). Courtesy Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland.

Adolf Wölfli holding the paper trumpet that he used to perform his music, c. 1926. Courtesy Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland.

Adolf Wölfli, *Saint-Mary-Castle-Giant-Grape*, 1915. In *Geographic and Algebraic Book 13*, p. 75. Pencil and color pencil on newsprint, 28 ⅝ x 41 ¼ in. (72.8 x 105 cm). Courtesy Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland.

Adolf Wölfli, *Felsenau, Bern*, 1907. Pencil and color pencil on newsprint, 29 ¼ x 39 ⅛ in. (74.3 x 99.3 cm). Courtesy Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland.

Wölfli's condition grew worse in the asylum, where he was tormented by terrifying hallucinations and fits of violence. He attacked the hospital guards and destroyed everything he could get his hands on. Morgenthaler describes Wölfli's state in an account that also reveals the abject punishment that psychiatric patients endured at the time: "Wölfli ran around, stormed, broke, tore, and demolished everything he could; he soiled himself and those who approached him; in brief, he created such an uproar that he had to be locked up in his cell for weeks at a time, naked with a pile of seaweed" (1992: 88). For much of his life at the asylum Wölfli lived in complete isolation. Four years after his initial confinement, he began to draw. The process of creating things seemed to calm him. The doctors took notice, and began giving him a weekly ration of pencils and paper in order to reduce his outbursts. Over the next thirty years he produced thousands of detailed drawings, notebooks of

writings, and musical compositions in a notational system of his own invention. When Wölfli died, the stack of drawings and manuscripts next to his bed was six feet high. His drawings, writings, and musical scores are interwoven together as a total work of art: his illustrations are represented as music; his music is depicted as visual art, and the entire narrative is an experience of sound and sight simultaneously. His five-part epic, titled "St. Adolf-Giant-Creation," consists of 45 volumes and 16 notebooks, totaling 25,000 pages, with 1,620 illustrations and 1,640 collages that provide an alternate account of his life story as he rewrote and imagined it, expressing a fictive autobiographical narrative of mythic proportions that described his experiences in the realm he invented as St. Adolf II. Significantly, Wölfli's adventures in this imaginary world all take place before the death of his mother—remembered as a joyful time of love and caring. In various books he reinvents history, geography, religion, and his family. He documents his travels throughout the globe and his rise to wealth and power, as well as the ongoing cycles of torment, death, and rebirth in a world that he ruled through his imagination. Yet that world, or the states of mind that evoked and procured it, also tortured and destroyed him. In his writings, Wölfli at times reveals his emotional state: "Full of melancholy, remorse, pains, homesickness, fear, and grief, I have already spent 14 whole years of my meager existence behind locked cell-doors, at the Waldau mad-house. . . . The divine peace is gone: And with a burned heart, I sink down, dying, on an unfamiliar pillow" (quoted in Spoerri and Baumann, 2003: 39).

When Morgenthaler arrived at the Waldau asylum in 1907, he recognized the soothing effect that drawing had upon Wölfli, but he also was astounded by the remarkable artistic merit of Wölfli's ornate and densely detailed drawings. Unlike previous doctors, Morgenthaler began to preserve, rather than discard, the art. He documented Wölfli's artistic routine, and he described Wölfli's creative methods in the second chapter of his monograph:

> Every Monday morning Wölfli is given a new pencil and two large sheets of unprinted newsprint. The pencil is used up in two days; then he has to make do with the stubs he has saved or with whatever he can beg off of someone else. He often writes with pieces only 5–7 millimeters long or even with the broken-off points of lead, which he handles deftly, holding them between his fingernails. . . . He almost never takes a break; as soon as one sheet is finished, he immediately begins another, ceaselessly writing and drawing. . . . He thinks with his pencil, and it is often movement that brings his thought. . . . He seeks to gather and fix from the sum of his internal experience as many as he can of those landmarks which correspond best to his personality and to his most profound instincts. This effort to retain as much as possible from the abundant stream of the life of his soul must be his hardest work. He himself expressed this with

> good humor one day while showing a half-filled page: "There's the work! You can't imagine how taxing it is to try not to forget anything. It would surely drive a person crazy if he weren't already." (1992: 21–23)

Morgenthaler encouraged Wölfli, supplied him with more materials, and became interested in the personal meanings of his art and its connection to his life experiences and traumatic events, an approach that was influenced by the relatively new theories of psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), who placed particular emphasis on the importance of the patients' life experiences and their own thoughts about their ailments in understanding mental illness. For Wölfli, art making had become a way to confront the crisis of his mental illness and reconstruct a sense of self. Morgenthaler recognized a change and progression of style in the work over time from disorder to a developed sense of control and order, which correlated with Wölfli's increased psychological stability. That arc echoed Jaspers's ideas about personal transformation, as Morgenthaler noted: "In his *Psychology of Conceptions of the World*, Jaspers repeatedly emphasizes the fact that new life may emerge from despair, that new strengths may develop after a crisis, and new forms may emerge from chaos. Wölfli has truly passed through such a crisis. . . . The instinctual energy of the first stage now gave way to something new. This new element no longer showed itself in a disorderly, chance fashion, but took a very defined form. It was not an occupation (in the sense we usually mean) which he found but an activity which *he created* in the solitude of his cell and which took on all the value of authentic work for him. It is precisely thanks to this work that he has, to some degree, freed himself" (1992: 88–90).

Art making did not heal Wölfli nor eradicate his psychoses, but in Morgenthaler's view, the creative process helped him contain his mental illness to some extent, while providing a degree of catharsis, a sense of order, and a virtual alternative reality. Specific themes are clearly evident in the work of Wölfli, who favored images of rebirth, morphing, and transformation, represented by butterflies and snakes, as well as mandala-like and oval shapes, which are often found in the art of individuals who have been traumatized and seem to impart a sense of harmony and psychic order (discussed further in chapter five).

In particular, Morgenthaler was fascinated by the structured style of Wölfli's drawings, including the circular symmetry and precise order of some works, and the controlled chaos of other pieces exploding with fervent

images and ideas and musical notations that covered every inch of paper. Morgenthaler called this sensibility and trait *horror vacui*—a fear of empty space—which is handled by the artist with a compulsive desire to fill every blank spot in a painting or drawing surface with images and words. For Morgenthaler, the meticulous order, harmony of colors, and varied forms filling every inch of space with detail illustrate Wölfli's struggle to control and transform his mental fragmentation and disorder into an ordered realm of psychic integration. Wölfli's art making was a "counter-instinctual" response that resisted the chaos of his mental illness: "It was the need for rest which one finds in all people, the need to recover calm out of agitation, stability out of uncertainty, unity out of fragmentation, limits out of boundlessness, order out of disarray, form out of chaos" (1992: 89). Morgenthaler did not propose a specific psychological theory of art or art therapy in his monograph, but he emphasized one key idea: an impulse for aesthetic order is fundamental to the creative process and to the psychological health of all human beings. In Wölfli's case, art making seemed to be a restorative form of self-therapy, helping to transform mental instability into a patterned and ordered state of being. Although previous studies had examined the drawings of psychiatric patients as a means of diagnosis, Morgenthaler's monograph, based on thirteen years of interaction with Wölfli, described him as an artist in his own right. This was the first time a patient, as an artist, was referred to by name and acknowledged as an artist, rather than clinically indicated by a number or initials, which had been the existing practice for identifying patients and their art.

Morgenthaler's case study of Wölfli generated interest among some psychiatrists, artists, and writers at the time, including Rainer Maria Rilke, Lou Andreas-Salomé, and Carl Jung, who owned three of Wölfli's early drawings, using them as examples to illustrate his theories about archetypes and mandalas. However, it was Hans Prinzhorn's *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, published the following year in 1922, that had an even greater cultural impact, influencing avant-garde artists such as Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Jean Arp, and Emil Nolde, among others. Hans Bellmer, the German artist known for his "doll project" created in opposition to the fascism of the Nazi Party, stated that reading Prinzhorn's study was the most important educational experience of his life. André Breton was also a devotee of Prinzhorn's book, which became a kind of underground bible among the Parisian Surrealists, and as noted, the book had a transformative effect on Dubuffet.

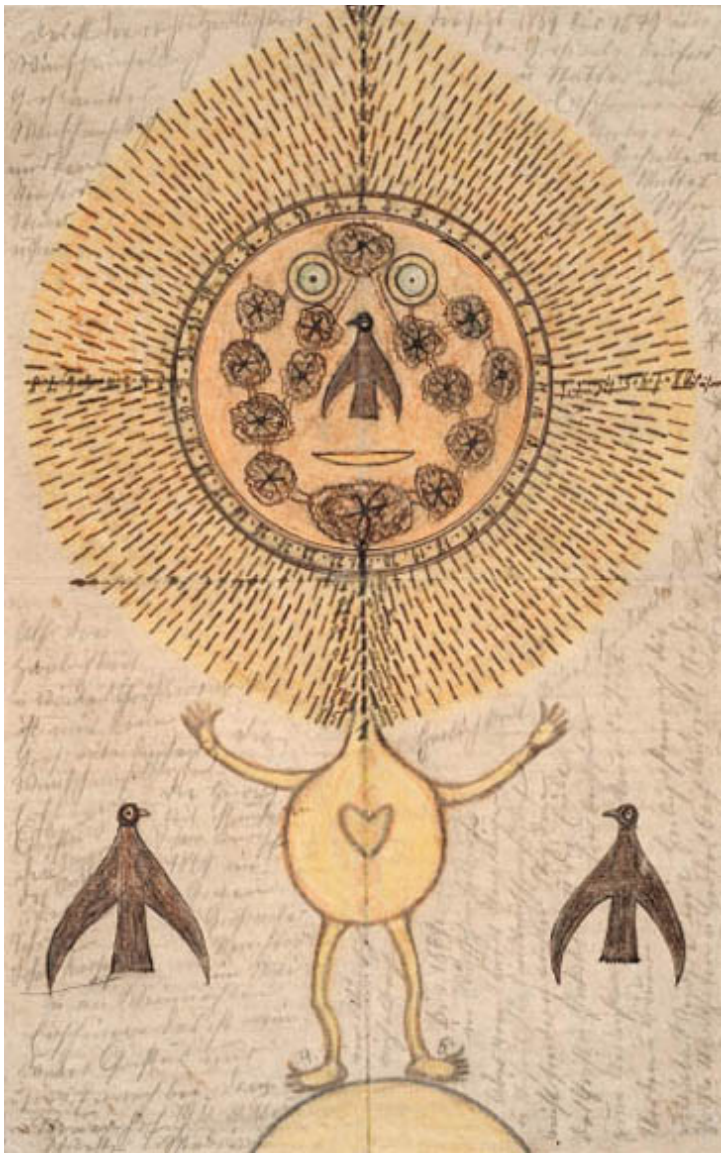
Hans Prinzhorn and the Artistry of the Mentally Ill

Hans Prinzhorn (1886–1933) was a trained psychiatrist and art historian on staff at the University of Heidelberg's psychiatric clinic in the early twentieth century. In 1919, he began collecting the "spontaneous" artistic creations of more than four hundred patients from his institution and other asylums throughout Europe, building on a collection begun by former head of the clinic Emil Kraepelin. Prinzhorn ultimately compiled more than five thousand paintings, drawings, collages, sculptures, writings and other art forms created by institutionalized individuals. The work of ten "schizophrenic masters" form the basis of his *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, including that of Karl Genzel (1871–1925), Johann Knopf (1866–1910), and August Natterer (1868–1933), who have since become well-known in outsider-art circles. Other works in the collection that Prinzhorn did not discuss in his study are now considered masterpieces as well, such as the hand woven hospital jacket created by the incarcerated seamstress Agnes Richter (1844–1918), which she embroidered inside and out with hundreds of lines of cryptic phrases and fragments of her past memories. The heartrending letters of the patient Emma Hauck (1878–1920), diagnosed with dementia praecox, have a comparable affective power; compulsively written but never sent to her husband, each page is thickly covered and barely legible with a blur of thousands of the same desperately repeated inscriptions of her loneliness and anguish: *Herzensschatzi komm* ("Sweetheart come") or simply *komm, komm, komm* ("come, come, come").[6]

August Natterer, *The Miraculous Shepherd II*, created before 1919. Pencil, watercolors on watercolor board, varnished, mounted on grey cardboard, 9 ⅝ x 7 ⅔ in. (24.5 x 19.5 cm). Prinzhorn-Sammlung der Psychiatrischen Universitätsklinik Heidelberg (Inv. 176).

Like Morgenthaler, Prinzhorn viewed the work of these patients as containing value beyond that of a diagnostic tool; they expressed a fecund and uninhibited aesthetic dimension. In his study, he identified what he called an instinctive and inborn creative urge common to all people (1995: xvii). However, he believed unfettered access to this realm of creativity resided in the unselfconscious work of the naive and untrained: children, schizophrenics, folk artists, and autodidacts. He considered this "primitive" drive to create art to be a more authentic means of expression than that of professionally trained modern artists. He was convinced that the artworks of these patients provided direct glimpses into the inner workings of the mind. In his attempt to locate the roots of art making and "pictorial configuration," Prinzhorn noted that the creative process has no one origin but is nourished

by a variety of “psychic springs”: “As groundwater seeps to the surface and flows toward the stream in many rivulets, many expressive impulses run in many creative paths into the great stream of art. Neither historically nor according to psychological theory does there exist a beginning point. Instead there are many springs which finally transcend all life” (1995: 15). Although the sources propelling the artistic process are many, the creative drive itself was guided by six main psychological principles, according to Prinzhorn: the impulses toward self-expression, decoration, playfulness, and imitation; the need to impose order; and the need for symbolic meaning. The creative urges identified among psychiatric patients are not more commonly found among or unique to the mentally ill, Prinzhorn asserted, but are innate artistic impulses shared by all human beings.



Johann Knopf, *Untitled (Glory of My Savior)*, created before 1910. Pencil, crayons, pen with black ink, and compass on office paper, 13 x 10 ⅝ in. (33 x 27 cm). Prinzhorn-Sammlung der Psychiatrischen Universitätsklinik Heidelberg (Inv. 1491).

Refuting popular assumptions about the connection between madness and creativity, Prinzhorn estimated that among his patients, less than two percent of those hospitalized began to paint, draw, or create sculptures spontaneously. He also rejected various superficial traits that might seem to unify such art, although he did indicate that there seemed to be something distinctive about the work of those diagnosed as schizophrenic patients, as the works sometimes conveyed a disquieting sense of strangeness or absolute alienation (*Fremdheitsgefühl*).[7] He saw recurring evidence of a

horror vacui in the art of these patients, for they often filled every available space of a work with decorative "scribbles" as though acting under compulsion, an observation similar to Morgenthaler's perceptions concerning Wölfli's art. The compulsive aspect of the artistic production of schizophrenics prompted Prinzhorn to consider and compare the intensity of their creation in relation to that of professional artists.

Agnes Richter, hand sewn jacket embroidered with autobiographical and other texts, created before 1919. Yarn on institutional grey linen, neck to hem 14 ⅜ in. (36.5 cm). Prinzhorn-Sammlung der Psychiatrischen Universitätsklinik Heidelberg (Inv. 743).

Despite Prinzhorn's desire to contribute significantly to psychiatry, his study, as Bettina Brand-Claussen points out, is a book ultimately about art (1996: 13). The view of art put forth in his work bears connections to a contemporaneous school of art, Expressionism, in which artists tended to focus on the use of distorted perspectives and jarring images to express intensely subjective, heightened emotional responses to their surrounding world. Prinzhorn, however, took pains to distinguish between the two, and regarded the work of self-aware and intentional Expressionist artists as less

"authentic."[8] In Prinzhorn's opinion, the Expressionists, and later the Dadaists and Surrealists, could approximate the interior focus and mental flux of a schizophrenic person and mimic the experience of the implosion of boundaries between interior and exterior perceptions of reality. But the Expressionists and others could never reach the pure and authentic level of creation of the artists in his study; inevitably, such schooled and formally educated artists were hindered by an inescapable sense of reflexivity and cultural awareness intrinsic to the trained modern artist.

Emma Hauck, *Letter to Husband*, 1909. Pencil on writing paper, 6 ¼ x 4 in. (16 x 10.3 cm). Prinzhorn-Sammlung der Psychiatrischen Universitätsklinik Heidelberg (Inv. 3621r).

In foregrounding the aesthetic qualities of the asylum inmates' art, Prinzhorn recognized that these artworks were more than mere symptoms of pathology to be diagnosed, but evidence of universal creative forces. Yet, his writings risk celebrating or highlighting the artworks of those who are mentally ill, while eclipsing the seriousness of their individualized, distinct suffering. The art produced by Prinzhorn's subjects is not a wholly autonomous or instinctual eruption; rather, it is contextually derived. Each work of art is a deadly serious attempt to regain and reintegrate the pieces of a fractured self. The cruelties of psychosis (or a psychic crisis) imbue the art, effectively representing each patient's desperate struggle to maintain control. As Inge Jádi, former director of the Prinzhorn Collection, tells us, "Every artistic activity on a patient's part is an act that creates meaning as a way of countering the existence-threatening erosion of meaning by the psychosis" (Jádi, 1996: 31). Most artists affected by psychoses lack the filtering mechanism that allows artists who are professionally trained to return from their explorations of alternate states of creative consciousness and perception to a grounded reality.

By claiming that some of the striking oddness of the images in Prinzhorn's book is derived specifically from the wider and shifting cultural contexts of Germany during the first thirty years of the 1900s, Caroline Douglas offers a further caveat to Prinzhorn's ideas about a universal creative impulse. She avoids the temptation to read larger, cosmic, and mythological archetypal narratives and themes into the artwork of the patients; instead, she attributes much of the imagery concerning women and sexuality that may evoke Freudian analysis instead to a pervading culture of ambivalence and anxiety about the role of women in German society in the years surrounding the First World War. As a result of the war's strenuous demands on, and sacrifice of, German men, women gained some degree of social mobility and power, and the traditional gender roles in society were destabilized. Some of the violent and disturbing depictions of women in the art of Prinzhorn's patients, Douglas suggests, may have embodied and reflected widespread cultural fears and patriarchal notions, magnified or distorted by the schizophrenic imagination (1996: 42–46).

Largely ignoring the cultural contexts that influenced the work of patients, Prinzhorn, like Morgenthaler, searched instead for an unadulterated source of universal creativity, a concept that Dubuffet later enthusiastically embraced and developed into his doctrine of authentic art brut. As observed

by Thomas Röske, current director of the Prinzhorn Collection, Prinzhorn's distorted approach "gave the myth of the immaculate cultural purity of 'the art of the mad' a veneer of scientific respectability . . . attributing an untarnished creativity to asylum inmates," which ultimately contributed to their ongoing social exclusion (2006: 17). Prinzhorn, in fact, did not work with most of the patients whose art he analyzed, and he knew relatively little about their cultural backgrounds, although he provided biographical details when possible. Morgenthaler, on the other hand, was Wölfli's doctor for some time and documented more biographical information about him. In any case, personal and cultural contexts were largely irrelevant to their theorizing about art, although recent research clearly indicates that Wölfli and the patients that Prinzhorn studied were not paragons of uninfluenced and universal forms of creativity. These individuals expressed ideas and images adapted from local folk cultures as well as the popular culture of the era, echoing the influences on the content and style of Martín Ramírez's art, with its references to culture and experiences outside the psychiatric hospital, both before and during his confinement. These highly acclaimed and often tormented individuals were not savants creating in a cultural vacuum; they were arbiters of local tastes and customs, culling and metamorphosing material from a cultural milieu, which was then refracted through their individual views, psychiatric episodes, personal trauma, and experiences of reality, resulting in distinctive hybrids of unique artistic expression.

Art Therapy and Outsider Art Debates

Despite the flaws in Prinzhorn's approach, his work expanded the awareness of the psychiatric and possible therapeutic importance of art making, and his ideas about the urge toward playfulness and the prevalent impulse towards order figure prominently in the relatively recent discipline of art therapy. The insights gained by the early studies of the art of the mentally ill spurred subsequent approaches exploring both the connection of art to the process of healing and the ways individuals reorganize meaning and order in lives fractured by illness or trauma. Modern practitioners of art therapy base their work on the idea that people of all ages and backgrounds can potentially benefit from the act of artistic creation. As defined by the American Art

Therapy Association, "Art therapy is the therapeutic use of art making, within a professional relationship, by people who experience illness, trauma, or challenges in living, and by people who seek personal development. Through creating art and reflecting on the art products and processes, people can increase awareness of self and others, cope with symptoms, stress, and traumatic experiences; enhance cognitive abilities; and enjoy the life-affirming pleasures of making art. . . . Art therapy integrates the fields of human development, visual art (drawing, painting, sculpture, and other art forms), and the creative process with models of counseling and psychotherapy."[9]

Art therapy as a term appears to have been coined in 1942 by the artist Adrian Hill, who personally discovered the therapeutic effects of art making while recovering from tuberculosis. In the mid-1940s, the artist Edward Adamson also was involved in exploring the therapeutic aspects of art making, and his non-interventionist approach and belief in the healing potential of creativity influenced subsequent art therapists (Adamson, 1990; Edwards, 2014: 25–26). The idea that a therapeutic aspect exists in relation to creating art and reflecting on art has been around for much longer, dating back at least to the notion of catharsis in classical Greek drama. In discussing the history of the development of art therapy in the mid-twentieth century, art therapist David Edwards notes that many early art therapists were attracted to the field because of their exposure to Prinzhorn's work and their fascination with the paintings of psychiatric patients (2014: 20). For example, the prominent art therapist Shaun McNiff cites the work of Prinzhorn as a major influence on his own view that art is central to human well-being, particularly Prinzhorn's originality in "positing universal human needs for expression and suggesting that our lives will be less complete if these needs are not met" (2004: 274). McNiff considers art therapy to be most effective when practiced from what he calls the "shamanic perspective," wherein the reestablishing of order and meaning for the patient is obtained by means of careful and continued interaction with the created image through the assistance of a trained art therapist. This process is conceptualized in terms of a management of energies—change may occur without a therapist, but often the patient faces a blockage prohibiting the flow of the psyche's vital energy (2004: 217–219).

Although the schizophrenic patients whom Prinzhorn studied suggested the possible healing properties of creative acts, they themselves were unable

to completely harness the healing power of art making because of the horrible strength of their psychoses. Art therapists have attempted to focus this healing propensity and bring it to bear on a range of personal issues, using it, as art therapist Cathy Malchiodi states, to "help individuals of all ages create meaning and achieve insight, find relief from overwhelming emotions or trauma, resolve conflicts and problems, enrich daily life, and achieve an increased sense of well-being" (2003: 1). Over the course of the development of the discipline, much debate has surfaced regarding the nature of the healing process. The basic split in approaches to art therapy has been characterized as a divide stemming from the question of art *as* therapy or the use of art *in* therapy. In the first approach, practitioners believe the creative process itself offers a healing potential because of the therapeutic effect resulting from an active redirection of the creative impulse as abreaction that purges psychological illness or blockage (as in the work of Edith Kramer). The second approach emphasizes art *in* therapy (or art psychotherapy), and focuses on the therapeutic relationship developed between the patient, the therapist, and the artwork (exemplified by the work of Margaret Naumburg). Created images are a form of symbolic speech and communication between a client and therapist; healing comes from this relationship and the beneficial catharsis of representing in visual form the nature of the problem, which was hitherto unavailable and unarticulated in verbal expression. As Edwards notes in his assessment of these perspectives, contemporary thinking about art therapy is moving toward an understanding that encompasses both sides of this theoretical divide and synthesizes aspects of both approaches (2014: 1–4).

Much of art-therapy practice descends from Sigmund Freud's development of psychiatry as the "talking cure," and thus positions itself in various ways in relation to the traditional emphasis on verbalization as a goal of therapy. The ideas of Carl Jung also have proven to be significant in the development of art therapy, as he stressed the primal significance of depicted images as active symbols and keys to the comprehension of archetypal human experiences and potentiality. Perhaps the major contribution of psychoanalysis to the development of modern art therapy practice is the idea that our "inner worlds" and relationships with other individuals are influenced by repressed emotions, conflicts, and mental processes that are largely unacknowledged or unknown, but that may be externalized in therapeutic contexts (Edwards, 2014: 46–48).

Both art therapists and theorists of trauma have devoted considerable attention to the role of childhood experience in the formation of adult responses to trauma and healing. For instance, clinical psychologist David Crenshaw (2006) has studied the impact of childhood trauma on the neurobiology of the brain, which may alter and shape modes of perception and responses to stress. Psychiatrist and therapist Eleanor Irwin writes of the use of nonverbal forms of communication to enable traumatized children to express painful memories and emotions in a "psychologically safe" fashion, allowing children to organize fragmented pieces of their shattered personalities and reintegrate them into a cohesive whole (2006: 97–98). By returning to these elemental modes of communication, victims of trauma can express themselves in a manner that bypasses the repression and sublimation of the conscious mind. This, in turn, enables children to channel raw and painful emotions into physical, kinesthetic acts of creation, which often results in a visual representation that corresponds in a meaningful way to the internal experience of trauma.

Trauma, as a category of psychic wound, encompasses a wide array of experiences both psychological and physiological, and as such, has become an increasingly important area of focus for art therapists (Malchiodi, 2003: 10–12, 133–145). While exact definitions may vary, the general consensus is that a traumatic experience essentially fragments the survivor's feeling of unity of self. Cohesion and meaning become addled and disoriented, resulting in a general inability to move beyond the experience, which haunts the survivor as recurring intrusions, manifested mentally and physically in the form of agitation, panic attacks, or full-fledged flashbacks of the experience. The notion of repetition abounds in the literature on trauma, art therapy, and the art of the mentally ill, and it is evident in the work of numerous artists identified as outsiders, including Wölfli, Ramírez, Darger, Madge Gill, and Edmund Monsiel, among others. The concept stems from at least as far back as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in which Freud identifies the "compulsion to repeat" manifesting itself in the symptoms of traumatized soldiers returning from World War I. This discovery led Freud to unveil his theory of a "death drive" in human beings. This impulse is hypothesized as the urge to return to a static, inorganic state, which may be part of the need to impose order, although many modern trauma theorists have returned to Freud's pre-death drive hypothesis, in which he argued that the psyche repeats the experience of trauma in an attempt to gain mastery

over it (Herman, 1997: 41). The repetition compulsion takes on characteristics of an autonomous entity, subjugating all other mental functions and possessing the person, as it were. Some theorists have suggested that this compulsion to repeat is perhaps behind historical depictions of trauma and schizophrenia as experiences of demonic possession, and may be the source of the increased occurrence of "magical thinking" and dependency on "superstitions" and lucky charms observed in both trauma survivors and schizophrenics (Herman, 1997: 46, 96–97).

In the twentieth century, Freud and the development of psychoanalysis had an enormous influence on the "therapy" aspect of the discipline of art therapy, positing the subconscious mind as a vast repository of repressed drives and desires accessed only when patients bypass the conscious mind, as in hypnotic trance or the dream state. David Edwards traces the roots of art therapy further back to the Romanticist elevation of individuality and intuition (2014: 16–20), while art therapist Susan Hogan dates its origin in the emergence of moral treatment in the early 1800s (2001: 47–49). The common designation of psychoanalysis as the birthplace of art therapy is incorrect, Hogan asserts, since early psychoanalysis, in her view, regarded the imagination with anxiety, aligning it firmly with the repressed and subconscious, the chaotic dangers of the id. In contrast, art therapists tend to view the imagination as having a more positive role in the growth of the healthy psyche (Edwards, 2014: 26–28; Maclagan, 2001). Although the authority of Freud and psychoanalysis may have been given an overly privileged position in discussions about the foundation of art therapy, the influence of Freud's ideas cannot be ignored altogether. His concept of the unconscious and the ability of a dream's visual content to reveal matters that the conscious mind could not acknowledge remains central to the discipline of art therapy, even if many therapists disagree with Freud's emphasis on verbalization as a mode of integrating the subconscious material of the image into the conscious mind.[10]

To a greater degree, Freud's disciple Carl Jung has influenced the application of psychological principles in regard to the curative properties of art and art making. Jung's ideas about the ways art can be used to address experiences of trauma and anxiety were based in his work with traumatized patients and his own response to a period of crisis in his life. After his break with Freud, Jung was filled with self-doubt and despair, his reputation in ruins. Inexplicably, he spontaneously began to engage in the play of his

childhood, building a village out of stones to cope with his extreme distress. In a state of emotional turmoil and by accident, he discovered the possible therapeutic possibilities of art making, and his subsequent work with his patients revealed that the creative process, sometimes spontaneous or inspired by images revealed in dreams, enabled individuals to contain or overcome their emotional pain or mental anguish in ways that were psychologically restorative. In contrast to Freud's emphasis on the "talking cure" as the primary means of addressing psychological struggles, Jung concluded that the creation of images or objects could express the untapped and innermost aspects of psychological conflict, in ways that were healing and transformative. He encouraged his patients to draw and paint, and he regarded the creation of images as the externalization of crisis, the expression of otherwise inexpressible, traumatic, or unmanageable ideas and emotions. He referred to this process as the "active imagination," which he viewed as similar to the process of dreaming while awake, stating, "Often the hands know how to solve a riddle with which the intellect has wrestled in vain. By shaping it, one goes on dreaming the dream in greater detail in the waking state, and the initially incomprehensible, isolated event is integrated into the sphere of the total personality" (quoted in Jung and Chodorow, 1997: 57).[11] Jung further hypothesized that images, as symbols, contain archetypal elements of the collective unconscious that can function as a bridges between the conscious and unconscious mind. This notion has been extremely influential within art therapy, with the consequent understanding that art making is a "useful method of tapping the healing aspects of archetypes" and of helping a patient to achieve a missing feeling of wholeness in his or her life (Malchiodi, 2003: 43). As therapist David Maclagan states, Jung's influence in the development of art therapy encompassed not only his belief in the therapeutic primacy of the image or its archetypal symbolism, but his overall insistence that art making provided profound insights into psychological states and offered the promise of personal understanding and emotional healing (2001: 83–87).

Both Jung's image-based analytical psychology and Freud's psychoanalysis have been adopted and developed further over the years by art therapists. For example, Margaret Naumburg, Edith Kramer, and Judith Rubin drew heavily from psychoanalytic theory in their approaches by making connections between the various defense mechanisms of the ego, such as sublimation and repression, and the spontaneous expressions of the

unconscious in the art of their patients, especially with children, as in the work of Kramer and Rubin (Malchiodi, 2003: 43). Influential British art therapists such as Michael Edwards (1987) and Joy Schaverien (1992) have drawn on Jungian analytic theory in their practices while working to better understand the function of image making in the therapeutic process.[12]

Of course, art therapists stipulate the improvement of the mental health of the patient and the patient's overall comfort and stability as the primary goal of therapy. The aesthetic quality of the art produced is secondary, if it comes into consideration at all. Art therapy was in some ways sparked by the work of Morgenthaler and Prinzhorn, both of whom emphasized the value of the patients' work *as* art and as genuine aesthetic ability and accomplishment. Advocates of art brut and outsider art were similarly influenced by Prinzhorn and Morgenthaler, with the focus on the artistry and authenticity of the mentally ill person's work, not on the therapeutic value of the creative process.

As modern medicine changed throughout the twentieth century, the availability of therapeutic drugs and increased acceptance of art therapy as a serious discipline contributed to the growing debate over the ethics concerning the collecting and conceptualizing of outsider art. Medication often settled and "quieted" the mental illness in patients, achieving the goal of the therapists, if not that of those interested in the art itself. According to some observers, such treatment prevented patients from creating art of the same caliber and stylistic interest as the art produced prior to medication routines. Dubuffet in particular spoke adamantly against the role of the medical industry, which he argued was destroying originality and authentic art. His supreme examples of art brut, such as Wölfli, Aloïse Corbaz, Carlo Zinelli, and Heinrich Anton Müller had been institutionalized, and more than half of the artists he championed were diagnosed with schizophrenia or had histories of mental illness. Comparable views about the negative influence of medication have been expressed by Michel Thévoz, past director of the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne: "The fact is that inventive creations have not been located in psychiatric hospitals since the 1950s, when drug therapies became widespread, except for the few notable exceptions who are represented by precisely those patients who are not medicated. . . . Therapeutic concerns and supervision had finally neutralized spontaneity, personal commitment, and the spirit of anti-authoritarianism, which are the necessary components for artistic creation" (quoted in Peiry,

2001: 195, 198). For both Thévoz and Dubuffet, the interest was primarily in the aesthetic aspects of art brut works as art, not in the psychological or sociocultural analysis of meaning. Their emphasis remains very much at odds with art therapy's focus on the cathartic functions of the creative process and its potential to alleviate suffering and improve patients' emotional health.

Like leading figures of the Surrealist movement who valorized an imagined liberating potential of insanity, Dubuffet saw mental illness as a source of creativity and artistic freedom, offering anticultural critique of the ills of modern society. As he stated, "Madness lightens the man, gives him wings, and promotes clairvoyance–or so it seems" (1988a [1949]: 33). In this romanticized view, the suffering and personal pain of the mentally ill are largely ignored, or even celebrated as allowing access to authentic creativity. André Breton expressed this view as well when he proclaimed that he was "not afraid to put forth the idea . . . that the art of those who are nowadays classified as the mentally ill constitutes a reservoir of moral health. . . . Here the mechanisms of artistic creation are freed of all impediment. . . . The fact of internment and the renunciation of all profits as of all vanities, despite the individual suffering this may entail, emerge here as guarantees of that total authenticity which is lacking in all other quarters and for which we thirst more and more each day" (quoted in Maizels, 2009: 8).

Although Dubuffet, Thévoz, and other art brut aficionados were convinced that pharmaceuticals and implementation of art therapy programs had all but eliminated authentic art among the mentally ill, they believed that outposts of *brut* creativity still existed, and they began to search for "individual dissidents" and non-conformists, those who "have avoided cultural conditioning and social conformity: the solitary, the maladjusted, patients in psychiatric hospitals, prisoners, eccentrics of all sorts . . . artists indifferent or oblivious to all artistic traditions and fashions" (Peiry, 2001: 197). Specific criteria were developed to determine whether an artist was eligible for inclusion in the Collection de l'Art Brut: art history experts evaluated the originality and independence of artists and identified any contaminating traces of cultural, traditional, or folk art influences. Attention was paid to an artist's full development of a "personal artistic syntax," as well as life history, personality, and other factors. Furthermore, the museum's acquisitions became based on the following five criteria: social

marginality, cultural virginity, the disinterested character of the work, artistic autonomy, and inventiveness (Peiry, 2001: 197–198).

In their hunt for outsiders, they occasionally discovered that art therapy programs did not necessarily destroy what they considered raw creativity, with the most famous of these programs occurring in the *Haus der Künstler* (House of Artists) in the psychiatric hospital at Gugging, Austria. The House of Artists was founded in 1981 by psychiatrist Dr. Leo Navratil in an attempt to foster an environment in which a small number of psychiatric patients selected for their artistic abilities could exist in isolation from the surrounding world and the "corrupting" influences of culture. In shielding his patients from the outside world, Navratil subscribed to Dubuffet's requirement that art brut be "raw" and emanate from a core sense of self, untouched by the forces of modern civilization. Some of the more famous Gugging artists include Johann Fischer (1919–2008), Johann Garber (born 1947), Johann Hauser (1926–1996), Oswald Tschirtner (1920–2007), and August Walla (1936–2001).

Navratil attempted to keep medical interference with his patients at a minimum, resisting even the "normalizing" influences of the other wings of the hospital. His goal with the House was not for the patients to return to society (they were considered too ill to do so), but to provide them with new identities as artists in a place where their creativity would be supported (Maizels, 1996: 86–87; Rhodes, 2000: 92–97). In Navratil's view, patients' art making could be both therapeutic and serve as a diagnostic tool of psychological conditions, but his standpoint was distinctly "anticultural" and opposed to the intervention of art therapists and antipsychotic medications. He viewed the patients at Gugging as individuals with mental disorders creating works of art rather than as disturbed patients manifesting pathological symptoms of disease. Although Navratil worked to inspire the artists and believed their work had some inherently therapeutic value, he considered the art as less indicative of the attempt to regain social connections and make sense of the outside world, but rather, as evidence of creative reorderings of the artists' inner realities.[13]

Prompted and encouraged by Navratil's support, the work produced by Gugging artists received positive reception from the outsider-art world, an external recognition that further contributed to patients' stability and social identity in Navratil's view (1996: 46–47). Patients needed structure to create superior work, according to Navratil, and he provided them with

assignments, photographs of artworks to copy, and encouraged them in directions that he felt were the most aesthetically valuable. In fostering an image of the mental patient as first and foremost an artist, rather than "psychotic," Navratil had the power of selection, much like Prinzhorn did, over which of the Gugging artists' works embodied aesthetic merit and were of value to the collectors and others outside of the hospital. In this way, as art historian Colin Rhodes points out, art created in such clinical settings, which is influenced and then selected in specific ways, produces a curatorial result ultimately the same as the more obvious choices made by Dubuffet and the other art collectors who initially created and defined art brut (2000: 103). Both clinics and art purveyors effectively filter and reduce the number of "bad" artworks produced by patients, as most works created by mentally ill individuals are considered to be of no aesthetic value to outsider-art collectors and enthusiasts, regardless of their therapeutic value to the individual.

Gugging artists have interacted with professionally trained artists, which at times has been quite influential, as in the case of Viennese artist Arnulf Rainer (born 1929) collaborating with Johann Hauser, considered one of the more important outsider artists in recent decades. Manic depressive and institutionalized for most of his life, Hauser created work that frequently consists of sexual imagery of women, symbolic animals (owls, snakes, birds), and rockets and aircraft. Rainer, like Dubuffet before him, considered the art of the mentally ill to be of supreme value, and he actively sought to learn from artists like Hauser in order to produce art similar to that created in psychotic states. The two men became friends and worked together on a number of projects throughout the years, each influencing and interpenetrating the individual work of the other.[14] Hauser's work, however, was subsumed by an uncontrollable compulsive necessity to create, as art critic Mark Gisbourne notes. "Hauser remakes the world as he wants it, altering and distorting images to assuage his compulsive yearnings. In a state of acute mania . . . he relinquishes contact with the real and replaces it with the imaginary real" (1992: 183). The creation of art for many institutionalized individuals is characterized by recurring pain and torturous compulsion, a fact that risks becoming minimized by the tendency of outsider-art enthusiasts to romanticize these men and women who live with mental illness.

Private Art Realms: Inner Worlds and Outside Influences

The personal art realms created by institutionalized individuals and others labeled outsiders frequently feature vast alternative realities, as if the inner worlds of these artists and all the attendant uncertainties and urges toward structure become splayed, or mapped, in tangible form on paper and canvas, or through sculpture, assemblage, needlework, or other hand-made objects. In some cases these art realms are intricately detailed and feature a seemingly arcane language of symbolism and personal mythology, as seen in the solitary cosmology created by Wölfli. These often grandiose parallel universes may be inhabited as a sanctuary from past trauma, life difficulties, or relentless suffering, constructed as creative counter-worlds of meaning, desire, or transformation. However, these alternative domains of the imagination offer more than just refuge to their creators; they are evidence of a profound attempt to restructure their own inner realities. In this way, the creative impulses felt by specific individuals may manifest in the form of exterior images of an interior drive to reorder and master experience, to reconstitute or assert a sense of self, in a process that seeks to make sense of the outside world as much as to express an inner reality.

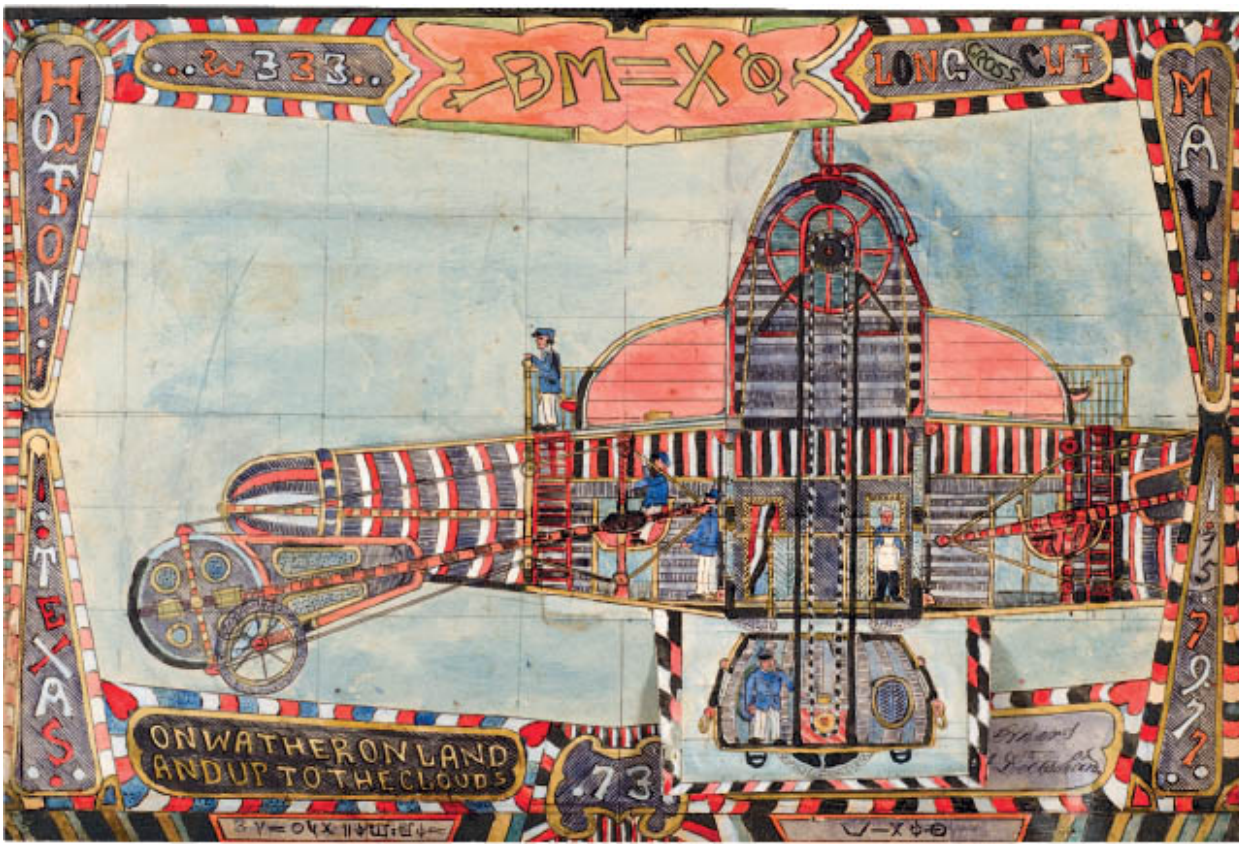
In the American context, the artists Henry Darger, Charles A. A. Dellschau, Morton Bartlett, and Malcolm McKesson are among those who have received particular acclaim as exemplars of outsider-art impulses, each having expressed extremely personal visions and alternative realities through their art. The Harvard-educated McKesson (1909–1999) outwardly led a fairly conventional, if somewhat reclusive life with his wife, the poet Madeline M. Mason, in Manhattan. Born to a wealthy New York City family, McKesson served overseas as a second lieutenant in the US Army, and upon his return he worked in the family pharmaceutical business. In 1951, with the support of his wife, he withdrew from the business world, apparently devoting himself to his marriage and secretly to his art, in which he created an imaginary world to explore his alternative erotic desires. His darkly scribbled pen drawings of voluptuous bodies and shadowy genderless figures, and his semi-autobiographical novella *Matriarchy: Freedom in Bondage* (which has been compared to *Venus in Furs* and the *Story of O*), express a tormented sexual excitement with scenes of bondage, transvestitism, and masochistic fantasies at the hands of a disciplinary mistress. Illustrated with hundreds of intricate ballpoint drawings,

Matriarchy charts the sexual transformation of a Harvard undergraduate, who learns to constrain his masculinity and submit to the strict authority of his mistress, who requires him to assume the role and costume of a lady's servant. McKesson's indistinct and dimly lit erotic scenes were created in what he described as a state of "wonderful excitement"; as he explained, "When I draw, I attempt to see the form in the undrawn. . . . This is therapeutic for me. . . . I want to rediscover a buried tradition, to rediscover the female in man" (quoted in Thorne, 1994/95: 31). McKesson did not share his hundreds of drawings or publish his book until the age of 84, after the death of his wife, in which he revealed his transformative servitude to what he referred to as "the strength and wisdom of the female" (quoted in Thorne, 1994/95: 31).

Malcolm McKesson, *Young Man Being Prepared for Marriage*, c. 1975. Ink on found envelope 9 ½ x 4 ¼ in. (24.1 x 10.7 cm). Courtesy Henry Boxer Gallery.

An equally private realm was secretly rendered by Charles A. A. Dellschau (1830–1923), who expressed an obsessive passion for futuristic airships and flying machines which survives today in the form of three memoirs and twelve existing hand-bound notebooks with thousands of drawings, watercolor paintings, and collages that were discovered in a trash dump years after his death. Born in Berlin, Dellschau immigrated to the United States in his early twenties. Little information exists about his life, although it is known that he joined the Gold Rush in California and eventually settled in Texas, where he raised a family and worked as a

butcher. In 1877 his wife and his six-year-old son died, and he later moved to Houston where he was employed as a salesclerk at a saddlery store. Records indicate that his second wife and his two remaining children had all died by 1893.[15] In 1899 he stopped working and spent the next twenty years of his life in a tiny attic apartment creating illustrated manuscripts that depict fantastic flying machines, called "Aeros"; he also recounted the real or imagined activities of the mysterious Sonora Aero Club, a secret society of aviation enthusiasts in California that he claimed had developed and piloted experimental aircraft, as well as a special fuel or anti-gravity substance, more than fifty years before the Wright brothers' first flight.



Charles A. A. Dellschau, *Plate 2333; Long Cross Cut on Wather on Land and up to the Clouds*, May 15, 1911. Pencil and watercolor on paper, 13¼ x 19 in. (33.6 x 48.2 cm). Courtesy of Stephen Romano Gallery, Brooklyn, NY.

Dellschau's luminous aerial contraptions, sometimes populated with pilots and passengers, often resemble flying carriages or hot air balloons with flapping wings, propellers, motors, retractable landing gear, pulleys, canopies, and other imagined aeronautic gadgets presented in a vernacular,

proto-steampunk style. His striking designs are decorated with detailed borders and include handwritten inscriptions, secret codes, and newspaper clippings related to the development of flight, technological advances, and the political events of the time. Dellschau worked at a rapid pace, creating nearly one ornate drawing each day for twenty-three years, binding them together in his notated, sealed volumes. After his death in 1923, his notebooks were stored in the attic of the family home in Houston until the house was cleared of flammable debris in the 1960s, and the volumes were left in the gutter and then taken to the dump, where they were salvaged by a junk dealer. Dellschau is now regarded as perhaps the first American outsider artist—an enigmatic isolate obsessively pursuing his uniquely individualistic airship-inspired vision. Yet his celebration of flight is not entirely idiosyncratic, but a reflection of the broader cultural enthusiasm for the miracles of the machine age and the remarkable possibilities of air travel, with the publications of the period filled with stories of spectacular new Zeppelins, the Wright brothers' achievement, and accounts of mysterious airships, which Dellschau embraced and eagerly incorporated into his work.

Henry Darger, Left: *They are almost murdered themselves though they fight for their lives. Typhoon saves them*. Middle: *At Norma Catherine via Jennie Richee. Vivian girls witness childrens bowels and entrails torn out by infuriated Glandelinians. The result after the massacre. Only a few of the murdered children are shown here*. Right: *Vivian girl princesses are forced to witness frightful massacre of children—Vivian girls not shown in this composition*, n.d. Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 22 x 89 in. (55.9 x 226.1 cm). Collection Kiyoko Lerner, © 2016 Kiyoko Lerner/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The imaginary world constructed by Henry Darger (1892–1973) also was a wholly private endeavor, and is now considered one of the most significant expressions of outsider art in the twentieth century, praised and studied by critics internationally. Discovered by his landlord a few months before Darger's death, the reclusive artist's narrative, *The Story of the Vivian*

Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion, is believed to be the longest work of imaginative fiction ever written.[16] Darger's 15,145 page, single-spaced epic is illustrated with nearly three hundred watercolor and collage paintings that vividly detail a war between the innocent and pure Vivian Girls and the evil adult Glandelinians, who enslave, torture, and murder children. His imagery ranges from depictions of tranquil children and fantastic winged creatures in peaceful lush gardens to scenes of ominous thunder storms and impending attack with startled girls running in all directions, to graphic images of children being strangled, disemboweled, and massacred. The seven heroic Vivian Girls, as well as the other young girls in the illustrations, often appear naked and are usually shown to have penises, which has led to much speculation about Darger's notions of gender identity and sexuality, as well as his possible repressed pedophilic proclivities.

Darger's richly imagined adventures of the Vivian Girls were born of a childhood full of trauma, abandonment, and abuse. When he was four years old, he was deeply affected by the death of his mother who died after giving birth to a baby girl, and he was haunted by the subsequent loss of his sister, who was immediately given up for adoption. Darger was separated from his infirm and impoverished father soon after and placed in a Catholic orphanage at the age of eight. Later, because of his odd behavior, he was sent to the Illinois Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children, with an official diagnosis of "self-abuse," a euphemism for masturbation. In the asylum, Darger experienced brutal physical abuse, but managed to escape five years later, eventually finding menial work as a janitor and dishwasher in several Catholic hospitals in Chicago. By all accounts, Darger's life in the city was uneventful and tedious, varying little over the next forty years. He went to work; attended Catholic mass daily, sometimes five services a day; he salvaged trash from the streets; and he spent the remainder of his time in solitude in a one-and-a-half-room apartment, writing and painting.

Henry Darger, *6 Episode 3 Place Not Mentioned. Escape during violent storm, still fighting though persed for long distance*, n.d. Watercolor, pencil, and carbon tracing on pieced paper, 24 x 74 ¾ in. (61 x 190 cm). Collection American Folk Art Museum, New York, gift of Nathan and Kiyoko Lerner (1995.23.1a). Photograph Gavin Ashworth © Kiyoko Lerner.

The introverted Darger never spelled out the meanings of his art. His work frequently has been interpreted as an expression of an alternative reality he created as an escape from his painful past and the drudgery of his daily existence, an imaginary world populated with characters and playmates, a realm that he then entered as an active participant himself. The loss of his sister has been suggested as a reason for the preoccupation with little girls in his work, as well as for his repeated attempts to adopt a child, while some writers have noted his preoccupation with a lost photograph of a five-year-old girl who was abducted and murdered in 1911 as a further catalyst for his creativity.[17] Darger's work is characterized by a desperate grasping for justice and order in a world in which children are especially vulnerable and abused by male adults, identified as the evil Glandelinians. In his manuscript and illustrations, the danger of enslavement and violence that always threatens the wholly innocent young girls is sometimes warded off by Darger himself, who appears as Captain Henry Darger and other Darger figures in portions of the work. In some sections of his manuscript, there are angry condemnations of a God that allows such cruelty and suffering, and Darger's alliances sometimes appear ambivalent or even seem to shift to the side of the evil adults, with vengeful assaults on innocent children and the threat that the vile Glandelinians will be victorious.

The meanings of Darger's perplexing masterpiece continue to be debated by writers, but his texts and imagery are generally assumed to reflect the traumatic events in his life, with conjecture about the influence of childhood

physical abuse, his obsession with the disappearance of his sister, ongoing possible confusion concerning gender identity (a result, perhaps, of sexual abuse experienced as a child), and the enduring grief or hostility regarding the loss of his mother and father during his childhood. In the view of some scholars, his drawings of naked girls with penises and the gruesome depictions of them being strangled, slaughtered, and disemboweled may be an expression of sadistic revenge fantasies directed toward those who he felt abandoned him as a child, while other critics find evidence in his work that he was a potential mass murderer, with possible pedophilic tendencies, and that the sublimation of these urges through art kept him from acting out his violent impulses. His primary biographer John MacGregor argues in his analysis of Darger's art that "there was a powerful force at work, creative and sexual, but also aggressive and sadistic. . . . Projected onto the Glandelinians are the monstrous drives of a serial killer. . . . Had Darger's violent sadistic impulses, and his increasingly bizarre conception of adoption, not found adequate expression in his alternate world, he might well have moved into action, with results too terrifying to contemplate" (1995: 30). Other writers, in Darger's defense, argue that his preoccupation with little girls and violent assaults on them were fantasies and not proof of deviant or murderous impulses lurking in his psyche, and furthermore that he was never arrested or accused of deviant behavior. His characters and their ordeals may represent different aspects of Darger's psyche or perhaps various expressions of his own experiences of assault and turmoil, projected and enacted in the dual roles of victim and attacker.[18] Regardless of the interpretation, most writers agree that Darger's prodigious output of images and texts, repeated over and over, offered him some sense of solace about his traumatic past, functioning as a release valve or catharsis of sorts that became compulsory, although the specific therapeutic functions of his art remain open to speculation.

Morton Bartlett, *Untitled*, 1936–1965. Gelatin silver print, 3 x 4 in. (7.6 x 10.1 cm). Courtesy of Marion Harris, Connecticut and New York.

The privately created, child-inhabited world constructed by Morton Bartlett (1909–1992), likewise seems to have provided both comfort and release, and it is unsettling and enigmatic like Darger's expressive endeavors. Bartlett, who like Darger was orphaned at the age of eight and lived his life alone, sculpted fifteen astonishingly lifelike plaster dolls—twelve girls and three boys, ranging in age from eight to the mid-teens—each of them half life-size, with interchangeable parts and an accompanying full wardrobe sewn and knitted by hand. Bartlett created these finely detailed and anatomically correct "sweethearts" over a thirty year period, in some cases taking nearly a year to complete one doll, studying anatomy books, children's growth charts, and measuring devices to insure their bodily accuracy, down to the smallest details. He carefully posed and photographed the dolls in sentimental portraits and childhood vignettes (such as scolding a puppy, waving excitedly, crying, or reading a book); he also photographed them in the nude and sometimes in a sexually suggestive manner. Bartlett once said that the purpose of his doll-making hobby was "that of all proper hobbies—to let out urges that do not find expression in other channels"; but

it was only after his death that the magnitude of his private, Geppettoesque creativity was discovered (Harris, 1994: 58).[19] After a brief article was published about his hobby in 1962, Bartlett abruptly stopped making his sculptures, and they were found along with their spare body parts, photographs, and drawings three decades later, still carefully wrapped in newspapers from 1963, stored in custom made boxes in the only locked cabinet in his house.

Like Darger, Bartlett never fully explained his work, and speculation varies widely about his motivations for creating his dolls. While many have assumed that making the figures and photographing them provided an outlet for deviant sexual desires, others have argued that Bartlett hoped eventually to mass-market the dolls as toys to children, or that they served as a surrogate family for a reclusive and lonely man who had lost his parents at an early age. Those who knew Bartlett seem to agree with the latter interpretation, viewing his handmade figures as a lovingly recreated family for which he yearned, or perhaps his desire for a vanished, idealized childhood, with the three boy dolls considered to be self-portraits in their resemblance to Bartlett at the age of eight (Harris, 1994: 14–17). Ultimately, Bartlett's work expresses ambiguous desires and an unknowable sense of longing, even as his meticulous process of artistically crafting his sculptures and then documenting them over the years clearly had some compensatory or therapeutic value.

Roy Wenzel, *Portrait*, c. 1990. Mixed media/paper, 25 ½ x 19 ⅝ in. (65 x 50 cm). Courtesy Nico van der Endt.

In encountering the secret art worlds of Bartlett, Darger, Dellschau, McKesson, and others who have produced things with no apparent audience in mind, part of the outsider-art allure is voyeuristic in nature, as viewers are permitted a peak at private fantasies, naked obsessions, and hidden realms. The enigmatic aspects of such art and the ongoing conjecture about mysterious meanings and hermetic motivations have been central to the genre's appeal. In a similar manner, outsider-art enthusiasts have been captivated by the private realms and internal states that are expressed by individuals with developmental disabilities or physiological conditions that

have caused brain damage. Many of these artists have difficulty communicating verbally with the outside world; the images they create offer unique glimpses of inner realities otherwise impossible to comprehend.

Traumatic childhood experiences and autism left Dutch artist Jimmy Roy Wenzel (born 1959) largely unable to communicate with those outside his circle of family and close friends. His family had come to the Netherlands in the early 1950s as refugees from Indonesia, during a time of violent upheavals in the Dutch colony as it moved toward becoming a nation state. Living in refugee camps, as a baby Wenzel began to suffer from extreme eczema, and was later hospitalized with blood poisoning after constantly scratching his inflamed skin. To prevent the scratching, he was made to wear protective tubes over his limbs, and his arms and legs were at times tied to the side of the hospital bed. It was during this time that he was diagnosed as having autism, although it is not known whether the condition had a genetic basis or was induced by childhood trauma.[20]

At the age of eleven, during therapy sessions in the hospital, he began drawing, and he continued in this endeavor at home, apparently drawing on anything he could find, and producing some masterful works. Although this early output was not saved, his adult work has long since entered the art market, shown in commercial galleries in the Netherlands as well as at international exhibitions of outsider art. Some of Wenzel's art recalls his years of severe physical and emotional torment, represented in a repeated image of childlike figure with its arms raised, hair standing on end, face twisted and mouth screaming in agony—a self-portrait of "Small Jimmy." Other hospital scenes are depicted in Wenzel's work, such as images of sadistic nurses in stiletto-heeled shoes spanking him; but not all of his drawings portray childhood torment, as he has created many scenes that reflect happy memories of his parents and family, often at gatherings, as well as landscapes, his train journeys, and other important events and people in his life (van Berkum et al., 2000: 10–15).

Wenzel is best known for his drawings that feature brightly colored backgrounds and eroticized images of women, with particular focus on their feet, legs, and shoes, which take up a disproportionate amount of the women's bodies, and sometimes exist as autonomous forms. These drawings are dominated by towering legs, red toenails, black boots, and stiletto heels. The female subjects themselves are based on women that Wenzel has personally met or seen on his train journeys. His excursions on trains are

especially important to him, and he uses a handmade frame on a pole, which imitates the windows of trains, through which to view his surroundings and relive memories before he begins to draw (van Berkum et al., 2000: 11–14). Wenzel's artwork provides a glimpse into his inner world, his painful memories and past and current pleasures, and the external world as he views it through the perspective of someone with autism, conveying his experiences in unique and powerful ways. But because of the nature of his disability, his personal motivations and interactions with his art remain obscure. Formalist outsider-art critics and collectors have praised his work for its "strange beauty," in some instances discussing the aesthetics of his images without consideration of the personal context of his art, to the extent of "deliberately steer[ing] clear of any direct reference to Wenzel's personal circumstances . . . [and] being more concerned with a general 'face value' response to the form and content of the work" (van Berkum et al., 2000: 23–24).

Another Dutch creator diagnosed with autism whose work has been similarly admired is Jeroen Pomp (born 1985), who for more than a decade has produced drawings in an art studio developed to foster creativity among developmentally disabled individuals. At the Galerie Atelier Herenplaats in Rotterdam, where Pomp makes art, the approach is much like that of the House of Artists in Gugging. The studio has few specific guidelines, tutoring, or restrictions on art making, based on the assumption that the greatest therapeutic benefits of creativity can be achieved when an individual is given complete freedom to create. As a result, Pomp has developed a vibrant style, his dense drawings streaming with color and jostling with a puzzle of characters, plant life, animals, and city scenes packed closely together, a stylistic approach attributed to his autism and evoking comparisons with the *horror vacui* described by Morgenthaler, as his intense images are overloaded with details and contain no empty space.[21] Like Wenzel's, the private world expressed by Pomp is not clearly comprehensible, providing an aesthetic experience of otherness as viewers can only imagine the inherent or intended meanings of his work.

Judith Scott, *Untitled*, 1991. Mixed media, 20 x 10 x 48 in. (51 x 25.4 x 122 cm). Photograph Benjamin Blackwell. Courtesy of Creative Growth Art Center.

Of the various art facilities for adults with mental disabilities in the United States, the largest and most well-known is the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, California, established in 1974. Like Gugging, Herenplaats, La Tinaia in Italy, the HAI Art Studio in Queens, New York, and other so-called progressive studios, its emphasis is on independent art making and creative freedom without intrusive direction from the facilitating staff, with the intent of allowing individuals to discover their own artistic styles and techniques. Among those who have developed their talents at Creative Growth over the years, artists who have received outsider-art acclaim include Dwight Mackintosh, William Scott, Dan Miller, and particularly the fiber artist Judith Scott, known internationally for her enigmatic sculptures. Born deaf and with Down syndrome, Scott (1943–2005), lived for the first seven years of her life with her family, until she was tested and diagnosed as severely "mentally retarded" (her deafness unrecognized at the time) and was subsequently placed in an institution. She then spent more than thirty-five years in various institutions and homes for the mentally disabled, often under cruel and traumatic conditions.

In 1985, her twin sister Joyce located and obtained custody of Scott and enrolled her in the art workshop program at Creative Growth. During the

first two years, Scott was uninterested in painting or drawing, but one day, after observing the use of fiber and textiles by an instructor, she immediately embraced this expressive form. After some initial instruction on basic techniques, Scott was allowed the freedom to choose her own materials and she began using yarn, string, wire, rags, sticks, fabric, and other objects to create woven and tightly bound biomorphic sculptures that sometimes resemble cocoons, pods, dolls, or containers. Her sculptures were formed around a skeletal armature, a central core usually comprised of concealed scavenged objects such as electric fans, magazines, foam packaging, coat hangers, and umbrellas (in some cases objects that Scott had stolen from others at the Center), which she then wrapped layer upon layer with colorful yarn, cloth, string, and other fabrics.[22] A number of her works feature pairs of two similar forms, which some writers speculate are related to her experiences as a twin. Other commentators have compared some of her sculptures to figures; however the majority of her works are abstract and nonfigurative in form, the meanings of which are unknown, as Scott was unable to verbally explain her work or what motivated it.

Questions of intentionality, influence, and motivation abound in studies of outsider art, even in discussion of artists capable of offering their own views on the subjects. Claims of spontaneous creation by psychiatric patients and those with developmental disabilities are tempered by suggestion, technical assistance, and access to materials supplied by doctors, nurses, therapists, and art facilitators. Dubuffet's stipulation that art brut must be "raw" and uninfluenced by cultural imperatives, amounting to romantic falsehood and imagined ideal, is untenable in the modern world. For institutionalized artists in particular, creation is necessarily shaped by the materials provided and the information that filters in from the outside world. Magazine pages, pamphlets, and advertisements have been common to the works of institutionalized artists at least as far back as the studies by Prinzhorn and Morgenthaler. Wölfli, in particular, incorporated images and advertisements from magazines into his work, such as his well-known collaged illustration that includes an advertisement for Campbell's Tomato Soup. That a typical medium of these artists is collage should not be striking or unexpected. Limited resources turned many institutionalized artists into master bricoleurs, creating labyrinthine narratives out of photographs, magazines, and news clippings that have been deconstructed and reformed through embellishment and recontextualization. Most of these artists lived

for years in society before being institutionalized, and traces of culturally specific anxieties, autobiography, folk traditions, religious beliefs, and popular culture influences can be discerned in the details of their creations and collages, as recent research on Ramírez and Wölfli demonstrates.[23] As noted, Dellschau's collaged notebooks contain thousands of newspaper clippings documenting the latest aviation developments or current events that fascinated him, while in the case of Darger, childhood experiences, Catholic influences, and his familiarity with popular culture are echoed in his techniques, brimming with bricolage and his appropriated use of magazines, catalogs, newspaper photos, comic books, cartoons, and coloring books in collage. The found illustrations of little girls, cut out or traced from magazines or salvaged from the trash, were "adopted" into Darger's world, like rescued orphans, which may correspond to Darger's own years lost in the orphanage and asylum, the loss of his sister, and his unfulfilled attempts to adopt a child of his own (MacGregor, 1995). Rather than a complete cultural isolate or outsider, Darger might be better considered a thrifty intertextual poacher of the popular sources of the period, including L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* books (1900–1920), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), the works of Charles Dickens, Civil War accounts, adolescent fiction, and moralistic publications that he creatively drew upon and refashioned in developing his own masterpieces.

Photographs, advertisements, collage, and detritus of popular material culture are central to the works of more recent self-taught artists as well.[24] The works of the internationally acclaimed Dutch artist Willem van Genk (1927–2005) overflow with images that reference a variety of cultural effluvia, most of which are connected through themes of travel, power, and the networks of conspiracy he believed threatened his existence. Van Genk was born in a suburb of The Hague in the Netherlands, the youngest in a Catholic family of ten children, with nine older sisters. As an infant he suffered from a mysterious hemorrhage and was twice found with blood streaming from his nose, ears and mouth, and at an early age he exhibited signs of behavioral problems that were later attributed to autism. He enjoyed drawing as a child, and after the death of his mother when he was five years old, he began to draw daily. At school he had trouble concentrating and neglected his homework; his father taunted him for his lack of concentration and for being "girlish," and attempted to teach him arithmetic by beating him and then making him add and subtract the number of blows. Failing his

father's expectations, young van Genk was sent away to live with an aunt and uncle, and then later off to a boarding school. For two years he was enrolled in a technical school where he studied graphics and advertising, but he could not conform to the rules of the educational system and he found it impossible to concentrate on things that did not interest him.[25]

Despite the hardships of his early years, van Genk's innate artistic talent and schoolwork in graphics helped him acquire a job at an advertising agency in The Hague, but he had difficulty staying on task and meeting the daily demands of the job, although his skillful drawings were admired by his colleagues. Later, he worked an assortment of jobs (typist, bakery salesman, bicycle courier), but in each case he became distracted and neglected his job duties, and because of his psychological and emotional state, he was unable to find any lasting employment or secure a career for himself. At one point he was assigned a job under the *Arbeid voor Onvolwaardigen* ("Work for the Deficient"), an institution that provided work for the mentally handicapped and those incapable of normal employment. His experiences during this time —living in a boarding house, being treated as a mentally disabled person, and performing menial chores from eight in the morning until five in the evening—traumatized him for the rest of his life. "I have never gotten over it, I think. Being labeled as 'inferior.' The bosses there make sure you know it. They're more like concentration camp bullies than bosses."[26] In the evenings after work, van Genk would travel for an hour to the home of one of his sisters with a roll of drawing paper and immerse himself in his art, finding refuge in the creative process. During this period he began hearing voices, apparently suffering from schizophrenia (van Berkum, 2010: 63–64). In 1964, he moved in with his sister Willy in The Hague, and after 1973 he lived there alone in the small apartment until 1996, when his condition worsened and he was committed to a psychiatric hospital, after which he lived in a nursing home until his death in 2005.

Willem van Genk, *Brooklyn Bridge*, 1960–1975. Mixed media and collage on paper, 38 ½ x 70 in. (98 x 178 cm). De Stadshof Collection, Museum Dr. Guislain; www.collectiedestadshof.nl.

Throughout his life, van Genk was fascinated with travel, and his imaginary depictions of the great cities of the world are the basis for much of his early work; these large city scenes are drawn in grandiose style, often from a bird's eye perspective, and are highly detailed and formulated out of his intensive study of travel brochures, maps, photographs, postcards, and magazines, as well as the books and encyclopedias in his extensive library, which also served as source material for his other works. Van Genk later travelled abroad, visiting Paris, Rome, Prague, Madrid, Moscow, New York City, and other cities, in fulfillment of his childhood dream of journeys to distant countries, and as a result of these travels, iconic vehicles of transportation became an even more prominent theme in his paintings. His experiences in the evening art classes he attended also shaped his work, as he learned about contemporary art and came to admire the urban collage techniques and "Combines" of the American artist Robert Rauschenberg. Yet he continued to develop a singular style of his own, encouraged by the director of the art classes who recognized van Genk's unique talent and considered it best for him to pursue his own path as an autodidact, largely free from art school influences.

Willem van Genk with part of his raincoat collection, c. 1988. Photograph Pascal Martin. Courtesy Nico van der Endt.

Willem van Genk, *Collage '78*, 1978. Oil paint on assembled wood boards, 36 ¼ x 41 ½ (92 x 105.5 cm). Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne. Photograph courtesy of Nico van der Endt.

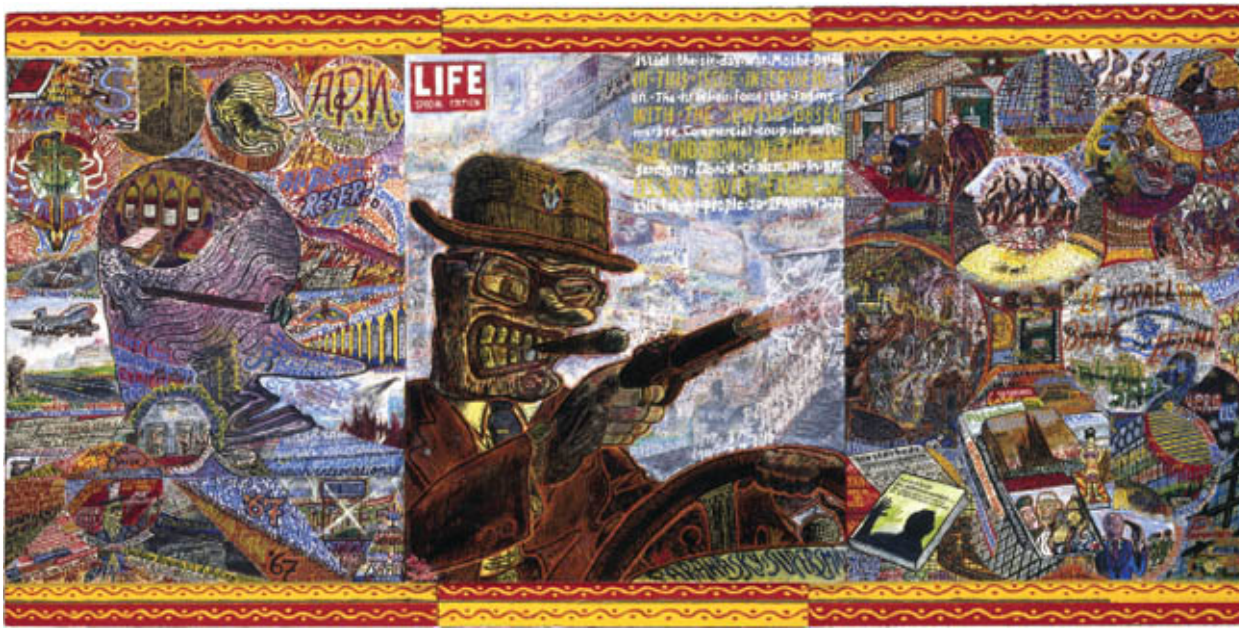
Much of van Genk's work is characterized by panoramic travelscapes with intensely hallucinogenic imagery, memory maps of electrified train stations, vibrant monuments in city centers, the complicated terrain of systems of transportation, labels and advertisements, and the dissonant noise and detritus of everyday life animated through densely interwoven collage, drawing, and the written word. Van Genk declared himself the "The King of Stations," reveling in his fascination with the world of transportation, ranging from railway and subway stations to ships, Zeppelins, aircraft, bridges, and other symbols of transport and architecture. His piece *Brooklyn Bridge* (1960–1975), for example, consists of a montage of airplanes, an

ocean liner, and a Zeppelin in the upper portion of the work, two renditions of the Brooklyn Bridge, scenes of the city skyline, and subway tunnels in the lower portion, and a pastiche of slogans (e.g., “Fidel Castro Viva Cuba,” “Americano”), brand names, and other images scattered throughout, from the Statue of Liberty and the American flag to scenes of Mt. Fuji, and free-floating cut-outs of a camera and cheese graters that were taken from his previous drawings and reassembled anew.

In the 1980s, van Genk began producing three-dimensional work from discarded materials, and created nearly seventy trolley buses, some of which became incorporated into his reconstruction of the Arnhem bus station, a large installation in his apartment featuring scrap metal, cardboard, milk cartons, candy wrappers, and other found materials twisted and combined in recognizable forms, layered and interwoven throughout the ever-expanding construction. Heineken cans and empty yogurt containers stood sentinel over scrap material buses marked with advertisements for McDonald’s and Coca-Cola, as if the assembled debris of modern consumer goods actually staged an alternative world, revealing the real world of power, money, and manipulation. In his fixation with systems of authority and control, van Genk understood the Arnhem bus station as a centrum of power, and through his meticulous reconstruction of it he became its creator and master, the “Conductor of All the Trolleybuses,” in an entirely personal project, not for public exhibit but for him alone (van Berkum, 2001: 25–26; van der Endt, 1990: 23).

Struggling with paranoia and psychosis, van Genk created a bustling chaos in his artworks that echoed the terror and threat of the world as he experienced it. He believed the world to be thoroughly interconnected in a grand conspiracy that included political and economic systems, institutional religion, psychiatry, and the mass media, and he became convinced that this worldwide conspiracy was perpetuated in part by hairdressers. According to his friend and art dealer Nico van der Endt, van Genk’s conspiratorial ideas and “hair-fetishism” could be debilitating, as he was afraid to venture outside, terrified and yet fascinated by the sight of women having their hair lathered in a salon. A glimpse of such activity was capable of provoking a state of extreme agitation, uncontrollable sexual excitement, and public embarrassment; at one point, he stopped painting because of such fears. “It is because of the march of the hair salons that I no longer paint. They are masculine companies, they are all fellows, who employ women, it is just a

mafia, with their own police" (van Genk quoted in van der Endt, 1990: 16). The web of conspiracy underlying his sense of reality is mirrored in his art, with its labyrinthine, net-like patterns and grid designs, and a complex of wires and threads appearing in nearly all of his work, revealing the hidden networks of power and control that encompass and overwhelm. Through the creation of these scenes, van Genk attempted to manage and assert his own power over the forces that assaulted him. For instance, in his densely drawn cityscapes, as van der Endt observes, van Genk "is like a master architect wielding his power over the entire city . . . in a world manipulated and deceived by the political and economic power elite" (2014: 20). Van Genk's works often convey a sense of constant and sometimes dizzying movement and shaky uncertainty, and yet there is a diagrammatic order to the barrage of cacophonous images, achieved in part by the techniques he used, in which he would cut up and paste his smaller drawings onto a large sheet of paper, or cut out sections of older drawings and then recombine and refigure them in a systematic montage. Words in a variety of languages are scrawled across his compositions, and even the reverse sides of his pieces become collage-style narratives covered with magazine clippings, correspondence, ticket stubs, hand-written notes, or his memories of past travel. Overflowing with fragmented scenes, words, and experiences, the onslaught of imagery and unfiltered complexity of these layered tableaus perhaps reflect the symptoms of the mental illness that van Genk experienced and that he attempted to delineate, control, and conquer through his work.



Willem van Genk, *Parnasky Culture*, 1972. Oil on fiberboard, 27 ½ x 56 in. (70 x 142 cm). Photograph Claude Bornand. Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne.

Throughout his life van Genk identified with the downtrodden and the marginalized, and he was initially attracted to communism, believing it would offer equality and social justice. Many of his works depict Moscow and other Eastern European cities, celebrate socialist ideologies and historical events, and critique the evils of capitalism and Western society. In his comic strip-like *Parnasky Culture* (1972), van Genk interweaves Russian themes, news flashes, and a graffiti of slogans into a swarming mass of images that illustrate the gangsterism, commercial propaganda, brutality, and oppressive nature of life in the Western world as he viewed it. Van Genk later became disillusioned with communism, regretting his enthusiasm for it, and was terrorized by its perceived shadowy menace, as well as the threat of the Catholic Church and the all-encompassing web of institutions and societal forces that he believed were involved in the global conspiracy. His feelings of paranoia were shaped early on by an intrusion of the Gestapo into his family's home in the Netherlands during World War II, leaving him traumatized, powerless, and vulnerable to malevolent forces. Nazi officers burst into the family apartment searching for van Genk's father, who was a member of the Dutch resistance movement and had provided a place of hiding for Jewish families. Brutally interrogated and terrified by the Gestapo officers in their long leather coats with insignia, van Genk later became fixated on the power of the uniform, and he found temporary protection from his fears and paranoia by wearing long raincoats that he crafted. Replacing all the buttons on the coats with rows of shiny metal snap fasteners and press-studs, these powerfully protective garments were made operational by his embellishments and thus "activated" to shield him from danger when he ventured into public places. The raincoats served both a defensive function and as a cloak of manhood endowed with fetishistic sexual power, and he owned hundreds of them, believing that each raincoat, unfortunately, lost its protective power after a single use.

At one point van Genk explained that his personal modifications of the raincoats were "works of art just like the paintings," and that they offered him protection from the forces that assaulted him; wearing the coats without fear on the street, these empowering press-studded magico-erotic garments became more useful to him than his paintings, which had not brought him

the cure he wanted.[27] As a result, he began to abandon painting in the late 1970s, focusing instead on amending his raincoats and constructing his trolley bus assemblages. His paintings, his raincoats, and his assemblages all were attempts to gain a sense of control and overcome past trauma, chart and construct meaning, and provide fortification against the menacing forces that conspired against him. Although he embraced his identity as an artist, his work seemed to function primarily as a deeply personal strategy for survival and as a self-administered form of therapy. Towards the end of his life, he reflected upon the things that he had created and commented, "Call it art if you like. I don't care one way or the other."[28]

Van Genk was not able to heal himself through the creative process and become a "healthy painter," as he had once hoped, but through imaginative acts that had apotropaic power, he attempted to manage the effects of his psychosis, cope with his fears and traumatic experiences, and deflect the potentially overwhelming nature of his inner reality from bleeding into the outer world. His engagement with broader culture, rather than "contaminating" his aesthetic vision as outsider-art purists might argue, provided the material he crafted into artistic embodiments of his own vision of reality, and his creative endeavors seemed to have helped him in his struggles, at the same time conveying to others his far-reaching portrayal of the individual manipulated by overpowering and interconnected systems of domination.

The works of outsider artists can be conceived as expressions of inner realms of experience, as with Jimmy Roy Wenzel or Judith Scott, or as instrumental in a process of sublimation that channels potentially dangerous or destructive psychic energies into acts of creation, as in the case of Wölfli or van Genk; a combination of the two is most likely. Aesthetic production as a means of self-preservation, consciously or not, appears to be a function shared by those labeled outsider artists and by some survivors of trauma. This link makes sense, as the traumatic experience may be too overwhelming for one's psyche to adequately process. In a number of cases, those individuals regarded as prominent outsider artists, including Wölfli, Darger, van Genk, Zinelli, and Madge Gill, among others, were profoundly influenced by early childhood traumas, although their conscious use of artistic activity to preserve a sense of the self remains a topic of debate.

Trauma, Art, and the Portrayal of Outsiders

The extent to which the expression of traumatic response in visual form is therapeutic or even possible is the subject of ongoing dispute among contemporary theorists of trauma. Representing trauma is impossible, some commentators argue, since any attempt to do so is reductive to the point of meaninglessness and fraught with the potential for manipulation into a discourse of power and exclusion.[29] Holocaust images have been used as an example of why one can never fully capture the magnitude and horror of a traumatic event, as attempts at representation result in depictions that conventionalize, contain, or trivialize the horror. The relationship of artistic creation to the process of recovering from a traumatic experience has received varying degrees of attention from trauma theorists, although often connections seem to be implied or left unstated, perhaps due in part to the long stigma attached to the diagnosis of trauma, from its early days as a form of hysteria related to World Wars I and II when traumatized soldiers were accused of "malingering."

The study of trauma is marked by a controversial history, from Freud and Josef Breuer's original understanding of it as a form of neurosis originating in the repression of childhood experiences of sexual abuse (a theory later abandoned by Freud as he replaced the actuality of abuse with the fantasy of forbidden seduction), to the official recognition of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. The experience of trauma, as outlined in the APA's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, is defined as:

> direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate (Criterion A1). The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror (or in children, the response must involve disorganized or agitated behavior). (American Psychiatric Association, 2000: 463)

While the exact understanding of the physiological, neurobiological, and psychological processes of trauma are still subject to debate, a survey of the literature on trauma reveals a consensus concerning the identifying symptoms of the traumatic experience, considered to be any experience that overwhelms the psyche to the extent that it disrupts an individual's ability to

accurately process the event, thus overpowering the "systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (Herman, 1997: 33).[30] Military combat, rape, sexual and physical abuse, natural disasters, genocide, terrorist attacks, torture, and witnessing violent death or assault are frequently cited examples of experiences that are potentially traumatic. Trauma is a subjective experience, and other events sometimes not acknowledged also may be traumatic, including emotional abuse, life-threatening illnesses, gruesome car accidents, forced migration or cultural dislocation, and any number of other distressing experiences.

Psychiatrist Judith Herman lists hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction as the preeminent symptoms of traumatization (1997: 35). Hyperarousal refers to a heightened sensitivity to any stimuli that, through associations conscious and unconscious, may trigger the reoccurrence of the body's physiological response to the original traumatic experience. For instance, the sound of a car backfiring may recall the experience of gunfire to a Vietnam veteran, provoking a physical reaction in the form of shortness of breath, sweating, and high anxiety. The phenomenon of intrusion refers to the tendency of the traumatic experience to replay itself in the form of flashbacks and nightmares, which can thrust themselves upon the sufferer's consciousness as a vivid and terrifyingly present repetition of the experience.[31] This unsettling feature of trauma results from the inability of the brain to process and integrate the traumatic experience; instead, it inputs the information into a different part of the brain as a fundamentally different form of memory, giving rise to various theories of how and where the brain "imprints" this information that somehow renders it both inaccessible and repeating.[32] The final posttraumatic symptom of constriction refers to the paralyzing effect that the intrusion of the traumatic experience can have on the victim, causing a psychic dissociation that defensively shields the psyche from harm. This dissociative response to trauma is protective, cutting off threats by numbing the victim into a trance-like state. However, this response makes later reintegration and mastery of the experience difficult, because it effectively fragments the psyche, storing the memory of the experience in a form inaccessible to the conscious mind. The tension between intrusion and constriction in the mind of the trauma victim creates what Herman calls the "dialectic of trauma" (1997: 47). In this view, the contradictory psychic states of the hyperarousal that accompanies intrusion

and the dissociation of constriction repeatedly alternate; neither, though, is able to vanquish the wounds of trauma.

Because the experience of severe trauma is generally considered to be inaccessible to the conscious mind of the trauma victim other than as intrusive and vividly present repetitions of the moment of trauma, direct expression of the experience as sought in standard therapeutic situations is often impossible. Artistic creation, however, as theorized by contemporary art therapists, may present a method of bypassing the defense mechanisms of the mind to directly access the unconscious. Art therapist Stephen Levine attempts to bridge the fields of trauma theory and art therapy by focusing on the nature of the relationship between the trauma and the act of creation by the traumatized individual. Levine insists that representing trauma is impossible, asserting that as a fragmenting experience, trauma at its core remains beyond the grasp of reason and rationality, so any attempt at representation reduces its horror within the bounds of rational expression. Attempts to represent trauma always render it impotent and deflated, denigrating both trauma and the victim's experience of it (2009: 17–18). Fundamentally unrepresentable, trauma can, however, be artistically *expressed* in a manner meaningful to the victim.

According to Levine, the possibility of finding meaning in the artistic expression of the traumatic experience is grounded in the concept of *poiesis*, which he defines as "the human capacity to respond to and change the world through the act of shaping what is given to us" (2009: 25). In this regard, the end result of the art produced in a therapeutic setting is far less important than the process of creation. Art making is a dynamic expression of chaos and turmoil that gains meaning through the poetry of the expressive act without demanding the resolution of competing tensions in the way that a rationally composed representation might. For trauma victims, the act of creation, rather than functioning as a tool for therapy, enacts a "purification" of the inner experience that encompasses trauma without claiming to heal it.[33] The repetition of the traumatic experience through art is not a reenactment of the past, but opens up the possibility for renewal through an imaginative reshaping of the victim's world, changing it from one haunted by past experiences to one in which the past is accepted and carried forth into the future.

Trauma has been a central trope in the popular and scholarly assumptions about outsider artists, although the concept and its relationship to such artists

has not been truly interrogated or theorized. It is important to reiterate that the majority of individuals labeled outsider artists did not create art in response to traumatic experiences. Furthermore, among those acknowledged "outsiders" who may have experienced trauma at some point in their lives, a number of them also were affected by a constellation of psychiatric disorders ranging from autism or schizophrenia to bipolar disorder. The impulse to create art, which fascinated Prinzhorn, likely serves a variety of functions in relation to the psyche, some of which include the release of repressed energies and emotions. The creation of art as the external expression of internal forces does not guarantee any inherent therapeutic value, although in some instances the impact of trauma on the art of certain individuals, and the therapeutic value of art making, is clear and verifiable.

Psychologist Amy Stacey Curtis, writing of the use of art by female artists who have experienced traumatic events, stresses the subjectivity of such experiences. "Trauma involves many types of experiences and cannot be placed in order of intensity. An experience found to be 'traumatic' for one individual might not be traumatic for another; no two people are affected by trauma in the same way" (2005: 21). Focusing on the lives of four female visual artists from the past and five from the present, Curtis notes similarities in the symbolic language of the art of trauma, while paying attention to the individual relationships each woman has to her own aesthetic rendering of the traumatic experience, which she notes may be conscious or not. Among the individuals Curtis discusses is Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), the initially self-taught Mexican painter, famous for her series of self-portraits that convey her traumatic experiences and related physical and psychological wounds. Kahlo contracted polio at the age of seven, resulting in her right leg becoming shorter and thinner from limited use. At the age of eighteen, a terrible bus accident shattered her body, breaking her spinal column, her collarbone, and her pelvis. One of her legs was fractured, her foot crushed, and a metal rail crashed through her back and pierced her uterus (Fuentes, 1995: 11–12). She underwent repeated surgeries to try to repair her severely injured body (more than thirty operations), none of which brought relief, and she had relapses of extreme pain. She longed for a child, but had repeated miscarriages. By the end of her short life, she was often ill and eventually had to have her leg amputated. Kahlo first began painting during her recovery period from the bus accident, and as Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes notes, her numerous variations of her self-portrait translate her pain

into art, articulating it in a visible and emotional form; her art became a way to cope with chronic pain, as she created a visual diary of her experiences.[34] She refashioned her self-image in the process, expressing her inner strength, courage, and vitality. “I am broken,” she said toward the end of her life, “but I am happy to be alive as long as I can paint” (quoted in Fuentes, 1995: 23).

Painting was inextricably bound to the many traumas of Kahlo’s life, as is the case with the other women about whom Curtis writes, although many of them were victims of sexual trauma such as rape and incest—traumatic experiences often hidden from public view. For each of these women, artistic creation is a means of expressing complex reactions to trauma that cannot be easily addressed, and the effects of which have a wider reach than just the individual, as forms of trauma that are widespread and affect women across cultures. Curtis, however, cautions against the emphasis often put on the personal traumas of female visual artists by art-world pundits. The women she writes about are artists first, and their artistic contributions should not be overshadowed by their traumatic experiences. Their works are understandably influenced by the horrific things they have endured, as the work of all artists is necessarily influenced by life experiences. Nonetheless, art by these women is often stigmatized in the art world as “trauma art” or “victim art” and regarded dismissively as melodramatic or attention-seeking art behavior, with individuals “parading their wounds” (Curtis, 2005: 164–65). Disregarded and kept apart from mainstream art, such art is treated in a sense like outsider art in its marginalization, with or without the cultural cache of unbridled creativity or raw authenticity associated with imagined outsider artists.

Rosemarie Koczÿ, *Standing Man #131*, December 5, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 92 x 72 in. (233.7 x 183 cm). De Stadshof Collection, Museum Dr. Guislain (on extended loan to QCC Art Gallery—The City University of New York).

The art of Rosemarie Koczÿ (1939–2007) illustrates the uneasy status of art that is based on personal and collective trauma and placed in the outsider-art category. As a survivor of the Holocaust, Koczÿ was very much aware of the psychological functions of her art, as she addressed the traumatic experiences of her childhood and understood the meanings and therapeutic aspects of her work. Koczÿ was born in 1939 near Recklinghausen, Germany. Her parents were Jewish, and she was deported in 1942 to a concentration camp near Dachau and then transported in a cattle car to

another camp, where she remained until 1945. She never saw her father again, while her mother was forced by the SS to provide daily sexual services to German officers, and when the camps were liberated in 1945, was discharged as a "prostitute" (Koczÿ, 2009: 2–5). Koczÿ, at the age of three, was made to work in the fields from dawn to nightfall; the untold horrors she experienced in the camps are recounted in her collection of writings, *I Weave You a Shroud* (2009). She remembers how her life was saved by a prisoner named Stacho, who gave his food rations to her and whose efforts to protect her cost him his life. Her *Standing Man* series of paintings commemorate his compassion and sacrifice.

After the war, unable to walk, Koczÿ was taken to a displacement camp, and later she lived with her maternal grandparents, until her grandmother died and she was sent to an orphanage, where she was subjected to years of harsh treatment. She recalls other children in the orphanage, made amputees by the war, whose "stumps were at times so purulent that we saved the soft insides of our bread so that they could stuff it into their artificial limbs" (quoted in Rivais, 1998: 33). She and her sister were kept from their mother, who was homeless and sick with syphilis after her ordeal in the camps, and who attempted to visit them often at the orphanage, but was not allowed to see her children. It was only after her mother died that Koczÿ was at last allowed to see her mother as she lay in her coffin. Distraught after her mother's death, Koczÿ fell ill for a three-year period. "I was virtually autistic. I no longer spoke and I lost a great deal of weight" (quoted in Rivais, 1998: 34). She suffered further hardships in the orphanage, until she was able to escape with the help of her grandfather in 1959, later finding a job as a maid in Switzerland, struggling and working long hours. In the early 1960s, she began to study drawing and tapestry techniques at Ecole des Arts Décoratifs in Geneva and started weaving tapestries as a way to express her painful experiences and the unspeakable atrocities she had witnessed in the camps. "We worked in the fields every day. I saw the killings, the shavings, the bleachings, the torture and hunger, the cold, typhus, tuberculosis. Death was all around" (Koczÿ, no date).

Rosemarie Koczÿ, *I weave you a shroud*; *Je vous tisse un linceul; Ich webe Euch ein Leichentuch;* 2000. Ink on paper, 14 x 10 ¾ in. (35.5 x 27.5 cm). De Stadshof Collection, Museum Dr. Guislain (from a series of 13 drawings); www.collectiedestadshof.nl.

Koczÿ eventually immigrated to the United States, where she established a reputation for her tapestries and was befriended by New York arts patron Peggy Guggenheim. In 1975, unable to speak about her Holocaust experiences, Koczÿ began to create small ink drawings of the faces of the people she remembered from the camps. At one point, she was advised not to continue these drawings, since people valued her tapestries, not the drawings. She responded, “But I can’t keep silent any more! I’m forty, I have suffered so much! I have to draw out of myself all this suffering, or else

I'll die!" (quoted in Rivais, 1998: 35). She continued with the drawings, showing them to no one, until at one point her work was discovered. These drawings, which numbered more than twelve thousand by the time of her death, are haunting depictions of Holocaust victims, sometimes alone, or as masses of emaciated people huddled and twisted together, their elongated limbs seemingly warped by the power of their pain and despair. Each pen and ink drawing memorializes a victim of the Shoah in a symbolic enactment of Jewish burial traditions in which the body of the deceased is purified and wrapped in a hand-stitched shroud. As Koczÿ said of her work, "The drawings I make every day are titled 'I weave you a shroud.' They are burials I offer to those I saw die in the Camps where I was deported in 1942, '43, '44, '45 and in the displacement camp until around 1949–1951. . . . I make these drawings, paintings and sculptures . . . to give a dignified, respectful burial to the dead (some of whom were yet alive) I saw bulldozed away and thrown into a ravine or pit and covered over with lime. The shroud is the thread of strokes which surrounds each of my figures in order to bury them with dignity. . . . Every day I continue to bury the victims of the camps —in total silence, alone" (quoted in Miyawaki, 2009: 104–105). Koczÿ inscribed her own inner pain on the reverse of her shroud illustrations: "I miss my family. . . . Drawing eases my suffering" (quoted in Smolders et al., 2014: 152).

Through her drawings, Koczÿ confronted her overwhelming experiences of trauma, but her art also participates in the task of bearing witness to a collective trauma, memorializing and honoring those who died. Each drawing she created is a burial ritual, a rite of purification and prayer for the dead, painfully and meticulously expressed. Yet each drawing is an act of visual testimony as well, a means of educating, commemorating, and contributing to historical memory. Koczÿ's images condemn the perpetrators, memorialize individual suffering, restore dignity to the dead, and warn against the recurrence of such atrocities. As a form of bearing witness, the primary role of such imagery is not so much to provide empirical evidence of horror and disaster, but to represent horrific occurrences with iconic presence, and to create a space for a secondary witnessing and understanding for those who did not directly experience the original traumatic events.

Like Rosemarie Koczÿ's drawings, Michel Nedjar's fetish dolls made from mud- and blood-stained rags, dead vegetation, bones, and street debris

express anguish about Holocaust trauma. Both Koczÿ's portraits and Nedjar's evocations of corpses and grotesque bodies caught the attention of Dubuffet and the curators of the Collection de l'Art Brut. Along with van Genk, Koczÿ and Nedjar have been categorized as examples of *Neuve Invention* (Fresh Invention), a term proposed to indicate work that was considered to have the visual power and inventiveness of art brut but whose creators had too much contact with mainstream art, culture, and normative society to be included in the art brut category. Dubuffet had previously created an annex collection for those works that did not meet his strict standards of art brut purity and that seemed to exist somewhere between the imagined polarities of non-cultural and cultural art. Michel Thévoz, who oversaw the *Neuve Invention* collection, described such art as "works that do not arise from the radical psychological rupture found in creators of Art Brut . . . but that are independent enough from the fine arts system to create their own kind of unorthodox position and a kind of cultural and institutional protest. . . . They are not counterfeiters, but rather smugglers who continuously cross the border between savagery and that of society" (quoted in Peiry, 2000: 215).

The romanticized criteria used to classify human creativity expressed outside the self-conscious mainstream—savagery, insanity, the primitive, authenticity, anticultural purity—persist within the discourse of outsider art, sometimes in offensive and characteristically racist ways. Perceived marginality, difference, and human misery continue to be fetishized, while formalistic qualities are emphasized over intentions and meanings, and cultural and personal contexts are frequently neglected. Categorized as raw art because of their stylistic features, hermetic attributes, and intensity, the works created by Koczÿ, Nedjar, van Genk, and others celebrated as outsiders often are expressions of inner pain, unbearable emotions, traumatic memories, or the terror of mental illness. Such images and objects are not necessarily created as art (and certainly not as outsider art), but in attempt to gain control or make sense of the world, to address suffering or trauma, as a form of therapy, or for other reasons not necessarily related to the idea of art. "I don't pretend to be an artist," Koczÿ once said when asked about her inclusion in the outsider-art category. "I work every day like a labourer on that collective memory. I am just someone who renders justice" (quoted in Rivais, 1998: 39).

The intensifying interest in outsider art as a viable and lucrative art genre in the twenty-first century has brought with it the familiar assumptions about outsiders as cultural Others, as well as a resurgence of formalist approaches fixated on aesthetic aspects, originality, and stylistic attributes. The enormously successful Museum of Everything, founded by art collector and entrepreneur James Brett, has purposely limited biographical information about artists to one sentence in order to "avoid the pitfalls of approaching work with too much personal narrative," which he believes would taint viewers' aesthetic judgments.[35] Advertizing itself as "a space for artists and creators outside modern society," the Museum's exhibits have been applauded by some commentators as a challenge to elitist notions about art and the tedious conventions of predictable museum exhibits, offering instead captivating displays that convey a wonder at the range of human creativity existing outside of the mainstream art world. The art of schizophrenics, Spiritualists, African Americans, evangelicals, and the mentally disabled are juxtaposed with Punch and Judy figures, circus banners, toys, tableaus of stuffed squirrels playing cards and smoking pipes, and other unusual items from Brett's own collection and those of the contributing exhibitors. The mash-up of eclectic objects has been enthusiastically celebrated in the media, with the museum described as "delightfully quirky," "bizarre," "downright oddball," and "mind-bogglingly bonkers."[36]

Although the Museum has been successful in stimulating an interest in non-mainstream art and perhaps perking up the outsider-art market, its playful exhibits, a hodge-podge of works taken from different historical periods and cultural milieus with little supporting contextual information, may ultimately reinforce the fetishized ideas about outsiders and eccentrics disconnected from society and engaging in acts of creative quirkiness. For decades, exhibits of outsider art have regularly ignored the social realities of individual creators, denying the makers of these objects a voice and offering little understanding of the personal meanings of their art. As writer and gallery owner Randall Morris has observed about the types of shows that have dominated the history of outsider-art display:

> True intention was replaced by a commercial form of marketing and presentation that emphasized whimsy and dottiness. On the walls of exhibition halls generalized show after generalized show was "curated" usually from a single uneven and historically incomplete private collection accompanied by catalogs that reiterated the same misconceptions again and again. Meanwhile the work was never hung by narrative or content or even context. Time periods were jumbled together as if the artists always lived in a timeless fixed place. . . . This

> type of curating is akin to the colonial approach that assumed all tribal art floated in the same timeless continuum, magically potent in a mythical past, present, and future . . . (2001: 119–120)

The discovery of the "art of the insane" originated in a similarly decontextualized manner. Later, Morgenthaler and Prinzhorn recognized the striking features and compulsive qualities in such artworks as aesthetic accomplishments rather than as symptoms of pathology, and postulated a universal human creative urge, paying relatively little attention to sociocultural contexts. As the field of art therapy developed, it was contended that art is a universal need central to human well-being. Art therapy approaches diverged in two main directions: art *as* therapy and art *in* therapy. Both schools of thought asserted that making art could assist in the recovery from trauma by allowing individuals to depict what could not be verbalized, to create order out of chaotic impulses, to address and integrate traumatic experiences, or tap into healing archetypes and the unconscious. From both perspectives, the aesthetic quality of art is considered secondary to healing, an approach very much at odds with the views of art brut enthusiasts, who valued aesthetic features over therapeutic ones, sometimes to the point of criticizing psychiatric care that is believed to hinder full-fledged and authentic creativity.

Not often recognized in the discourse about art and therapy is the misconception that the creation of art is *always* beneficial. Creativity does not always have restorative and healing benefits. As Colin Rhodes notes, the artistic activity of August Klett, one of the "schizophrenic artists" discussed by Prinzhorn, actually reproduced the torment of his hallucinations and intensified his suffering (2000: 120). Along the same lines, the British artists Nick Blinko and Raymond Morris illustrate the possible dangers of creative endeavors. Hospitalized and diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, Blinko (born 1961) is best known as the former lyricist and lead singer for the legendary British anarcho-punk band Rudimentary Peni. The band's albums and Blinko's three illustrated books feature his pen-and-ink drawings, and his artwork has been exhibited internationally after it was shown at the National Schizophrenia Fellowship in 1994. Blinko's intensely detailed images arise from acute psychic anguish and are created when he is not on medication, consisting of tortured faces, skulls, tiny monsters, broken dolls, mushroom creatures, fetuses, phalluses, and haunted homunculi interconnected and woven together in intricate configurations. Although taking therapeutic drugs eases his suffering, Blinko says that when he is on

medication he becomes frustrated and loses concentration; his vision is fuzzy, his hands shake, and his eye, hand, and brain do not function properly to make the art he desires (Thorne, 1996: 42). Without drugs he is more productive artistically, but then he risks full exposure to emotional pain and delusional states. “When I got ill,” he recalls, “I started to plant paintings in my garden to see if they would grow” (quoted in Thorne, 1996: 42). In Blinko’s case, the overpowering need for artistic activity does not alleviate suffering or mental distress, but poses a threat to his psychological well-being. Raymond Morris (born 1951) also is explicit in his description of psychological pain brought on by art making. Compelled by spirits that surround and sometimes haunt him, he says the creative process can have a cleansing effect and lead to deeper self-understanding, yet revealing these spirit forces through art can leave him vulnerable, bring great harm, and release dangerous impulses. “I realized that art could also kill me” (quoted in Maizels, 1998: 59). At times art making has proven detrimental to his health to such a degree that he has avoiding painting completely in order to prevent further self-injury. For these artists, image making does not necessarily offer a healing release or a therapeutic benefit; rather, the artistic process may subject them to prolonged suffering from unmitigated psychological torment.

Nick Blinko, *Untitled*, c. 1998. Colored ink on paper, 16 ½ x 11 ½ in. (42 x 29.2 cm). Courtesy of Henry Boxer Gallery.

While popular assumptions about the inevitably healing and transformative power of art may persist, more disturbing is the ongoing exoticizing of outsider artists as anticultural Others and the neglect of the biographical and sociocultural contexts of their art. The next chapter examines the lives and art of various well-known individuals who have been regarded as the embodiment of the outsider-art ideal, portrayed as expressing authentic artistic impulses free from cultural conditioning. Inspired by visions, dreams, and numinous experiences, guided by supranormal beings or forces, these individuals are regularly depicted as anomalous, abnormal,

or perhaps mentally disturbed. Although often labeled outsider, the artworks of Spiritualist mediums, apocalyptic prophets, African American visionaries, and practitioners of Vodou are rooted in religious traditions and culturally accepted revelatory experiences. The frequently disregarded religious meanings and contexts of such art are explored, as well as the personal experiences, vernacular traditions, and other cultural sources that have influenced the creation of visionary art.

FEAR NOT

Chapter 3

Visionary Art Realms

Spiritual Experiences and Vernacular Traditions

> The experiences that are called “visions,” the so-called “spirit world,” death—all these things that are so closely related to us, have through our daily defensiveness been so entirely pushed out of life that the senses with which we might have been able to grasp them have atrophied.
>
> **—Rainer Maria Rilke,**
> *Letters to a Young Poet* (1904)

When one surveys the available literature on individuals labeled as outsider artists, it becomes evident that the religious contexts and spiritual functions of their art are often de-emphasized or neglected entirely. Many artists assigned to the outsider-art category attribute their creations to personal experiences involving trance states, revelations, dreams, or the guidance of spiritual beings or forces—some sort of religious encounter or transformative spiritual experience that in many cases is an accepted part of their faith or a particular religious tradition. The term ***visionary art*** has been used to acknowledge the religious meanings of such art, although the term also has been proposed as an overall corrective to the problematic connotations of outsider art. The visionary art moniker also has been loosely applied to self-taught artists who create art based on an extremely personal artistic vision, whether religiously inspired or not. For instance, the hugely successful American Visionary Art Museum

in Baltimore describes visionary art in the following manner on its webpage: “Like love, you know it when you see it. . . . [The term] refers to art produced by self-taught individuals, usually without formal training, whose works arise from an innate personal vision that revels foremost in the creative act itself. In short, visionary art begins by listening to the inner voices of the soul, and often may not even be thought of as ‘art’ by its creator. . . . Unlike folk art, visionary art is entirely spontaneous and individualized. . . . Visionary artists don’t listen to anyone else’s traditions. They invent their own.”[1]

Such a description, whether a playful museum marketing device or a genuine attempt at definition, conveys the typical assumptions associated with outsider art, with its emphasis on idiosyncrasy, “inner voices of the soul,” and a disconnect from traditions and broader culture. Depicted as mysterious and unfathomable, visionary art, like outsider art, is imagined to be an expression of unknowable alternative realities. Such definitions do a disservice to the complexity of the art and the artists, discounting the cultural and spiritual influences that are often central to the artists’ motivations. Difference and isolation are stressed, the individual is portrayed as a singular genius separated from society, and the artist’s work is often extracted from the intricate network of personal meanings and cultural influences of which it is a part.

A more useful approach considers the ways that individuals are related rather than isolated, by situating their lives and art within the matrix of religious worldviews, spiritual experiences, trance states, vernacular traditions, social interactions, and personal motivations, which provide a deeper understanding of such art. Here, the term visionary art is conceptualized and defined in a precise manner that differs from the haphazard and unsystematic use so common among dealers, collectors, curators, and others in the field of outsider art. Aligned with Roger Cardinal’s assessment, visionary art is associated with individuals whose creative activities have been inspired by revelatory experiences, trance states, dreams, or waking apparitions, and who attribute these to a preternatural or supranormal agency such as a deity, a spirit, a divine force, or a sacred realm.[2] The visionary encounters that motivate such art are prevalent cross-culturally and historically, and must be understood within a wide range of anomalous experiences that include religious revelation, numinous events, spiritual possession, apparitions, dreams, hallucinations,

and otherworldly journeys.[3] Altered states of consciousness involving dissociation and ecstatic experiences are often inherent in the visionary process, as are shamanic states, out-of-body travel, near death experiences, mediumship, second sight, clairvoyance, and other divinely acquired prophetic or healing abilities.[4]

Historian and ethnographer William A. Christian Jr. argues that the study of such visionary experiences, far from being a fringe phenomenon, engages with some of the most pressing issues of human existence.

> Visions are a pervasive phenomenon that enrich and disturb the lives of a surprising number of people around the world. When found meaningful they are life and world changing events. Throughout human history visions have provided divine charters for major religions around the world, they have triggered wars and revolutions, inspired scientific discoveries, created communities, transformed landscapes, and served as a source of suffering, healing, and sympathy. On a more mundane level many people talk with their dead, believers converse with holy figures about personal problems, children play with imaginary companions, and everyone dreams. (Christian et al., 2010: 1)

Christian and other theorists assert that a cross-cultural understanding of visions offers insights into certain widespread experiences that are often regarded as pathological from a Western, secular perspective. Historians and ethnographers have shown that some of these experiences, including attaining trance and possession states, can be learned and are culturally valued forms of spiritual knowledge within many religious traditions. As scholars of shamanism have observed, the mental dispositions of individuals who would be diagnosed as having psychological disorders in Western societies are often imbued with religious power in some cultures, as hallucinations, dissociative states, and other seemingly aberrant behavior are interpreted as indications that the individual is a healer, diviner, or "soul specialist."[5] Rather than being condemned or rejected as victims of pathology, such individuals may be integrated into the broader community, to its benefit.

Historically, the divinely inspired art of shamans, prophets, sages, mystics, and other visionaries attempts to give tangible expression to often ineffable sacred realms, transcendent experiences, and otherworldly communications. Within Christian traditions, the Book of Revelation, which describes the apocalyptic visions of Saint John of Patmos, has been an influential literary source of visionary art, inspiring self-taught and professionally trained individuals alike. In the twelfth century, Hildegard of

Bingen (1098–1179), the celebrated Catholic mystic, composer, and philosopher, experienced apocalyptic and revelatory visions which were recorded and interpreted in writing and illustrations. The English poet and artist William Blake (1757–1827), often considered to be the epitome of visionary creativity, was trained as a printmaker, well read, and very much aware of his artistic predecessors. His ongoing visions of God, angels, spirits, and other entities inspired his work, in some cases providing divine instruction and guidance, with angelic beings even praising his creative endeavors in some accounts.[6] Blake's series of drawings *Visionary Heads* were based on his visions of famous historical, biblical, and supernatural figures who were summoned during late night sessions of inspired creativity; his well-known painting, *The Ghost of a Flea* (1819–1820), was developed from an apparition of a flea during one of these sittings. Blake's reputation as an eccentric (or a madman, depending on the source), his disregard for the conventions of his era, and the religiously inspired nature of his work have upheld his visionary, if not outsider-artist status. Similarly, the unusual and experimental drawings, doodles, and art ink blots of the French poet and novelist Victor Hugo (1802–1885) are frequently categorized as visionary art, inspired by Hugo's apparitional experiences and conversations with more than one hundred discarnate entities, including Shakespeare, Plato, and Jesus, as well as beings from other planets, whom he encountered in the Spiritualist séances that he attended from 1853–1855. Another acclaimed visionary artist from France was the domestic servant Séraphine Louis (1864–1942), whose work was inadvertently discovered in 1912 by German art collector Wilhelm Uhde. Deeply religious, she said her art was inspired by angels and the Virgin Mary. Séraphine worked in solitude, creating by candlelight, using her own exotic pigments made from mixtures of flowers, wine, blood, soot, and other scavenged ingredients, and her vibrantly painted scenes of colorful floral configurations and animated plant life convey the beauty of her numinous experiences and imagined world.

In the United States, the early nineteenth-century Shaker community, otherwise known known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, produced a significant body of work inspired by visionary experiences. Founded by Ann Lee ("Mother Ann," 1736–1784), the group's teachings and practices were based on her own ecstatic experiences and visions. From 1837 through the 1850s, the Shaker "Era of Manifestations" (also known as the "Era of Mother's Work") was a period of

spiritual revival and heavenly presence, in which visionary experiences, trance states, prophetic messages, and communication with the spirit world were expressed though ecstatic dancing, glossolalia, and "gift" songs and drawings. These gift drawings or "inspirational drawings" contrast dramatically with the normative Shaker aesthetic of the era, known for its non-ornamental, austere, and minimalist style. Gift drawings tended to be ornate and elaborate, with swirling imagery depicting symbolic flowers and fruits, the tree of life, and maps of heaven; others were heart-shaped valentines and intricate lace-like designs dense with written texts. The artworks produced during this golden age in Shaker history were created primarily by women who were inspired by visions and revelations received from the spirit realm and the late Mother Ann Lee.[7]

In some cultures visionary art is evoked by the ritual and religious use of psychoactive substances, such as the ayahuasca-inspired art of Amazonian shamans (for example, the art of Pablo Amaringo), or the art associated with practitioners of Santo Daime, a syncretic religion that originated in the Brazilian state of Acre in the 1930s, in which the ceremonial drinking of ayahuasca is considered a sacrament.

Within some Native American traditions, visionary experiences are also integral and sometimes conveyed in visual form, ranging from depictions of well-known "vision quests" to the peyote-influenced religious art created by members of the Native American Church. The art of Westerners who have experimented with entheogens such as LSD, ayahuasca, or DMT also has been situated in the visionary art category, such as the work of Alex and Allyson Grey, Robert Venosa, and Ken Kesey, as well as the artworks resulting from trance states at raves, transformational festivals, or carnivalesque events like Burning Man, the week-long annual event held in the Black Rock Desert in Northern Nevada.

Although artistic expression based on visionary experiences is a worldwide phenomenon, certain religious traditions have inspired art that is highly valued, collected, and analyzed as exemplars of art brut and outsider art: the works produced by members of the Spiritualist movement, the art of apocalyptic visionaries, the religiously inspired art of African Americans, and the sacred artifacts associated with the Haitian religion of Vodou are predominant in the field, and will be explored in the pages that follow.

Spiritualism, Mediumship, and the Art of Madge Gill

The majority of individuals initially identified by Dubuffet to be included as illustrations of art brut creativity were patients at psychiatric institutions. However, a number of other artists he favored were involved in the Spiritualist movement, participants in the practice of mediumship, including such classic outsiders as Madge Gill, Augustin Lesage, Laure Pigeon, Jeanne Tripier, and Raphaël Lonné. Although the work of these Spiritualists sometimes is viewed as a peculiar or semi-psychotic expression of the subconscious states of delirium, these individuals were working within the context of an alternative religious movement that emerged in the nineteenth century and that emphasized communicating with spiritual realms. Trance states and visionary experiences were central to Spiritualism, the beginning of which is usually traced to the spirit messages of the Fox sisters in Hydesville, New York, on March 31, 1848, although historians have shown that the movement had multiple origins and influences, including the ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) and Franz Mesmer (1734–1815).[8] Over the years Spiritualism developed into a global religious phenomenon, with millions of followers in the United States, Latin America, and Europe from all levels of society (Braude, 2001: 25–31; Trimble, 1995: 331–333).[9]

Spiritualism initially centered on the attempt to contact the spirits of the dead, and the mediumistic artwork produced by the followers of the movement that became so central to early conceptualizations of outsider art were not only artistic expressions, but regarded primarily as evidence of communication with other realms. Such works functioned as proof of these realms, whether expressing visions of other worlds or conveying messages and artistic designs guided by the spiritual intervention of departed loved ones or transcendent beings, often referred to as "spirit guides." The individuals producing these designs generally did not attribute the art to their own abilities, but regarded themselves as physical vessels or vehicles under the control of the spirit world. Although Spiritualism developed within the framework of Western Christianity, it often appealed to people who were dissatisfied with established religion, and thousands of local "home circles" emerged, offering the experiential confirmation of the afterlife through encounters with spiritual spheres and providing comfort to the bereaved in the midst of grief and loss. As a grassroots religious alternative to the orthodox views and institutionalized churches of its era, the movement often

attracted liberal reformers and abolitionists, as well as those involved in the women's suffrage movement, for Spiritualism sometimes allowed women to gain authority and leadership roles that established religions and dominant society denied them.[10]

Although feminist and reformist concerns were significant aspects of the movement, the unifying and primary principle of early Spiritualism was the belief in the possibility of contact with the spirit world as evidence of the immortality of the soul. In the Spiritualist worldview, souls in the afterlife are believed to evolve and progress through successively higher spheres of spiritual existence. These elevated souls may then mediate between visible and invisible realms and provide knowledge and moral guidance to human beings. Accordingly, special emphasis was placed on direct and numinous experiences in the séance room and the ability of select mediums, usually women, to contact departed loved ones through rituals and revelatory experiences. The Spiritualist movement emerged during a time of increased tensions between religion and science and empiricism; followers seemed to mediate these tensions, often adopting scientific concepts and terminology to formulate a liberal theology based on Christian notions of the afterlife. In this regard, an essential aspect of Spiritualism was the manifestation of physical "proofs" as concrete evidence of the supernatural, whether through spirit photographs, mysterious rappings, table-turning, the appearance of ectoplasm, automatic writing through the use of planchettes (and later Ouija boards), spiritualist art, or other kinds of materialization. Many of the proofs produced through mediumistic practices are characterized by the phenomenon of automatism, in which the personality of the individual is subordinate to that of the spirit realm and one becomes a conduit, communicating messages or spontaneously producing art and writings that are outside of one's conscious control. In a trance state, the medium is the instrument through which spirits direct the manifestation of written communiqués, drawings, paintings, or the playing of musical instruments, among other things.

Madge Gill, *The Crucifixion of the Soul* (detail), commenced June 1, 1934. Black and colored inks on calico, 1 ⅞ x 17 ¼ feet (56 cm x 5.25 meters). Image and dimensions courtesy London Borough of Newham Heritage and Archives.

Madge Gill (1882–1961) is often considered the embodiment of outsider artistry, as one of the most prolific British artists enthusiastically championed by Dubuffet and other advocates of the art brut genre. A practitioner of Spiritualism, Gill was inspired to create things during a period of grief and trauma, and produced her substantial oeuvre in a seemingly hypnotic state. Her work has been regarded variously as a symptom of mental illness, the epitome of outsider expression, or an example of the psychic automatism so prized by the Surrealists. André Breton, as the main theorist of Surrealism, celebrated the work of Gill and other Spiritualists not so much for its stylistic aspects but as an expression of non-rational creative forces—unbridled creativity, free from restrictive societal conventions.[11] Absolutely rejecting the idea that mediums were communicating with spirits of the dead, Breton valorized their mediumistic activities as privileged states allowing access to repressed or primordial aspects of the unconscious, the source of unmediated self-expression. Trance and dream states, he asserted, and particularly the mediumistic state beyond the control of the conscious mind and rational thought, exemplified the "pure psychic automatism" that was the goal of Surrealism as an artistic movement, as he defined it (Breton, 1969).[12] Dubuffet, like his friend Breton, also valued the work of Gill and other Spiritualists, but for different reasons. He feverishly collected their creations because of what he regarded as their obsessive, unself-conscious, and enigmatic style; he also believed they exhibited the tendencies of

rebellion, authenticity, and uninhibited creativity (Peiry, 2000: 136–139; Russell, 2011: 66). He was not interested in the religious context or the meanings of such art, but prized the work for its formal qualities, its originality, its marginal existence, and its challenge to the world of cultural art. Gill's art is indeed remarkable in its dizzying complexity, a vortex of swirling geometric patterns and labyrinthine designs, with shifting stairways, off-kilter architectural forms, interlocked zigzags and checkered areas, spirals and mazes, and disembodied female faces suspended and peering at us through the free-flowing ectoplasmic forms of the compositions—portals to other worlds.[13] These mesmerizing artworks reveal Gill's own unique experiences and superb creative abilities, yet they also exist comfortably within the larger context of Spiritualism, expressing her identity and role as a medium, and the mysterious realms she envisioned and conveyed through her entranced artistic designs.

Madge Gill drawing on calico with black ink on her billiard table in her home in Upton Park, London, c. 1938–1940 (detail). Unknown Photographer. © Tate, London 2014.

Gill was born out of wedlock in the East End of London. Her mother, Emma, named her Maude Ethel Eades, and rather than face public scrutiny over her illegitimate child, Emma hid her daughter away for a number of years, after which she was raised by foster parents and then sent to a girl's home in Northeast London at the age of nine. Five years later, she was shipped overseas by the orphanage with hundreds of other children as part of child-labor program ostensibly designed to offer them "opportunities" in the New World. During this period, Gill performed farm labor and worked as a babysitter and domestic servant in Ontario, Canada. Her time there left her

homesick and longing to return to England. At age eighteen she finally returned to London, where she worked as a nurse, at one point living with her widowed aunt, Kate. A practicing Spiritualist medium, Kate conducted séances and apparently inspired Gill's interest in Spiritualism, although Gill may have been introduced to such beliefs earlier by her Spiritualist grandmother Caroline Eades. During this time she met the son of aunt Kate, her cousin Tom Gill, and they were married in 1907. Although their marriage struggled, Madge gave birth to three sons, Laurie, Reggie, and Bob.[14]

Madge Gill, *Sea of Faces* (detail), c. 1935. Colored and black ink on paper, 24 ¾ x 19 ⅔ in. (63 cm x 50 cm). Courtesy London Borough of Newham Heritage and Archives.

Madge Gill, *The Crucifixion of the Soul* (detail), commenced June 1, 1934. Black and colored inks on calico, 1 ⅞ x 17 ¼ feet (56 cm x 5.25 meters). Image and dimensions courtesy London Borough of Newham Heritage and Archives.

In 1918, Gill's life tragically spiraled downward, beset by trauma. Reggie died in the influenza pandemic that year at the age of eight; after his death, Madge suffered from severe illnesses that required the removal of her left eye and all of her teeth; soon after, pregnant and hoping for a daughter, she experienced the trauma of delivering a stillborn baby girl. The heartbroken mother nearly died of complications during the labor, and she was severely ill for months, suffering from ongoing depression and possibly a nervous breakdown (Ayad, 2013; Cardinal, no date). In a brief period of time Gill had lost two children, almost died herself, was disfigured with a glass eye, and was suffering from chronic poor health, emotional collapse, and a failing marriage. It was during this period that she first received visionary inspiration and divine instruction to write and create art. As she described it years later in 1937, "I then had an inspiration to take up my pen and do all kinds of work of an artistic type. . . . It took various forms. First of all, knitting—even doing pieces of knitting on one knitting needle without any pattern. Then came a flow of all kinds of inspirational writing, mostly Biblical. Then I felt impelled to execute drawings on a large scale on calico.

I simply couldn't leave it and I did on average 20 pictures a week, all in colour. . . . I felt I was definitely guided by an unseen force, though I could not say what its actual nature was" (quoted in Cardinal, 1972: 135).

It is uncertain whether Gill participated in séances to communicate with her deceased children during this difficult time, but in the mid-1920s the unseen force that guided her work was identified as the spirit Myrninerest, a name that appears as a signature on many of her drawings (it has been speculated that the name comes from "My-inner-rest" or "Mine innerest [innermost] being"). As the spirit filled her, Gill was launched into a trance state in which she would write, knit, draw, weave, crochet, and sometimes play the piano, as described by her son Laurie, who notes the obvious Spiritualist and Theosophical notions in her work, including themes of Spiritual Progression, biblical references, lost languages, sacred inscriptions, and ancient symbols (Gill, 1926). Initially Gill created elaborate embroidered and knitted works and then later produced ornate and delicately patterned drawings. She expressed her visions in a variety of forms and mediums, often drawing on the backs of postcards and scraps of notepaper, but also creating huge works on unfurled rolls of plain calico fabric, an inexpensive woven textile. She worked on these large pieces, some more than thirty feet in length (her largest measured one hundred and twenty feet), in an ongoing and spontaneous manner, unrolling the cloth little by little as she progressed. Her son constructed a trestle device to help unfurl the fabric as she worked, and some of the finished pieces were so large she was unable to view them inside her house (Ayad, 2013). Clearly, it was the process of creativity that inspired her work, not the final product. Gill's rapid production of images similarly indicates that it was the artistic act itself and the related transcendent trance states that captivated her, as she composed her drawings quickly, working her way through a stack of one hundred cardboard sheets and filling more than a dozen of them with her designs in one evening. Over a forty-year period, she produced thousands of drawings, often working in darkness or with minimal light through the night. After her son Bob became an invalid for two years after breaking his neck, for instance, she spent entire nights by his bedside drawing or writing (Cardinal, 1972: 137).

Madge Gill, *Untitled*, n. d. Ink on paper, 25 x 10 ½ in. (63.5 x 27 cm). De Stadshof Collection, Museum Dr. Guislain; www.collectiedestadshof.nl.

Like other Spiritualists who engaged in mediumship, Gill insisted that she was merely a conduit for Myrninerest's spirit. Each image that flew from her hands and each item that she knitted or sewed was not her own—every design and idea came from her spirit guide. As she drew in pen and ink, the same image unfailingly appeared: a woman with a distant gaze in her eyes, a delicate nose, and tiny lips, often in a fashionable hat, surrounded by flowing shapes and geometric forms. The enigmatic expression in the eyes and on the face of this endlessly repeated figure sometimes appears melancholy or fearful, and at other times looks startled, curious, or pleased. Gill said that

each of the faces had meanings, but she never specified what they were. Some writers have speculated that the female figure represents her lost daughter, or her absent mother, or the girls from the orphanage of her childhood, or Gill herself. Roger Cardinal, who has written extensively on Gill, suggests that as self-portraits, the drawings possibly functioned as attempts to stabilize Gill's own fragile sense of self, or alternately, the faces perhaps represent Myrninerest, "envisaged as the artist's otherworldly alter ego, immune to the traumas of actual life" (Cardinal, no date; 1972: 144). Producing these drawings swiftly and without hesitation in a dissociative state, Gill created works that were often elaborate and detailed endeavors.

Dissociative states and traumatic experiences are often interrelated, as noted in the previous chapter. A person with dissociate fugue, for example, will become unconnected from her normative consciousness, psychologically escaping an immediate threat or a traumatizing situation or memory. In dissociative amnesia, the traumatic event itself is the direct cause for the memory loss, resulting in its becoming forgotten or repressed. Although dissociative states are frequently associated with psychopathology, current research affirms that while the capacity to go into trance varies considerably among individuals, hypnotic states are in fact a normal feature of human consciousness; and a significant correlation seems to exist between traumatic experiences and the ability to enter trance states, which may function to protect the individual and prevent the intrusion of painful memories and overwhelming emotions (Herman, 1997: 42–46, 102). Certainly within the context of Spiritualism, the dissociative states and continual spiritual interaction with Myrninerest that Gill experienced were not condemned as pathological but accepted as a privileged phenomenon, a central aspect of the movement. As in various other religious traditions, individuals such as Gill who had experienced inordinate trauma, severe illness, near death, or the loss of loved ones were considered especially endowed with mediumistic powers of otherworldly access and spirit communication. Her visionary states and those of other Spiritualist mediums share commonalities with the altered states of consciousness experienced by other individuals for whom numinous encounters are an established aspect of their religious tradition, whether evangelical Christianity, Haitian Vodou, the Native American Church, or shamanic practices, for instance.

In Gill's case, the loss of her son, combined with her devastating illnesses, disfigurement, the stillbirth of her daughter, and her disintegrating

marriage appear to have been catalysts for creativity, which she cultivated in states of spiritual trance, leading to a consuming life of artistry. The intense concentration involved in the creative process, the complete focus of attention and engagement in artistic activity, is itself sometimes a mechanism for inducing trance states and a flow-like loss of self, providing a sense of tranquility and easing inner turmoil, as will be discussed in chapter five. In any case, rather than associating Gill's life and art with outsider otherness and psychopathology, her artistic achievements may be understood as an expression of her inner strength and creative resourcefulness, a spirited endeavor to mitigate or overcome her experiences of childhood abandonment, the loss of loved ones, and other life crises. All people experience difficult life situations and challenges to some degree, and attempt to restore a sense of meaning and emotional stability; for Gill, the discovery of the artistic process and her involvement with Spiritualism enabled her to confront the inordinate amount of trauma in her life and create the possibility of healing and well-being to some extent.

The creative process and the trance experiences triggered by art making not only may provide respite from the pressures of daily life and offer a source of healing, but may transform the individual, filling one with an experience of religious ecstasy or elation. The Moravian artist Anna Zemánková (1908–1986), for instance, took up drawing at age fifty-two during a period of depression, and later said that she created her work in a joyous, exulted state. Working on her drawings in an apparent trance in the very early mornings before beginning her daily chores, she was liberated from her emotional burden. Listening to classical music as she drew her swirling and lush depictions of imaginary flora and fauna, she declared that her colorful illustrations actually drew themselves, seemingly guided by her "creator spirits" (Hernández, 1996; Rhodes, 2000: 149–151).

Augustin Lesage, *Untitled*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 39 ⅜ x 29 in. (100 x 73.5 cm). Courtesy of abcd collection/Bruno Decharme, Paris.

Similar sentiments about the trance-like and transcendent aspects of the creative process were echoed by Augustin Lesage (1876–1954), a French coal miner and acclaimed Spiritualist painter. When he was in his mid-thirties, he was instructed by his spirit guides to paint and draw, and in his first large canvas, ten feet by ten feet in size, he started in one corner and expanded outward in a spontaneous manner, with no planned composition in mind, until he covered the entire surface. Like Gill, Lesage worked at an inordinately quick pace when executing his detailed and symmetrical works, abandoning himself completely to the directing hands of his spirit guides in a

euphoric state. “When I work I feel that I am in an extraordinary atmosphere. If I am alone, as I love to be, I fall into a kind of ecstasy. It’s as if everything around me were vibrating. I hear bells, a harmonious pealing, sometimes far away, sometimes nearby; it lasts all the time I am painting. But this delightful peal of bells only happens if there is silence, it stops as soon as another noise is heard” (quoted in Thévoz, 1989: 16).

Absorbed in the creative act, Spiritualist artists were more than mediums transmitting otherworldly messages, as their trance states offered a spiritual union with divine realms and possible numinous experiences of transformation and spiritual rapture. Their visual renderings of such transcendent encounters and communications, despite their value today in the outsider-art world, were not produced as commodities, and the mediums often were reluctant to sell their work or refused to do so. For example, Raphaël Lonné (1910–1989), a rural postman in Southwest France, initially would not sell his drawings, saying they belonged to his spirit guide. Laure Pigeon (1882–1965), who first began creating mediumistic drawings during a time of crisis after separating from her unfaithful husband, sold none of her work, secretly producing more than five hundred drawings that were discovered in her room after her death. Although Madge Gill displayed some of her pieces locally in amateur exhibitions and shared them with Spiritualist associations, when approached about selling her art, she refused, or set impossibly high prices, replying that it was not hers to sell, as it belonged to Myrninerest. She did not seem especially interested in preserving her work either, further testament to its personally spiritual or therapeutic meaning, as hundreds of drawings were found in her home after she died, discarded in piles beneath beds and in cupboards, often torn or in damaged condition (Cardinal, 1972: 138).

The art of Gill and other famous Spiritualists that was created in trance states is captivating and often mesmerizing, but it is not an anomaly. Thousands of individuals have produced drawings, writings, and other manifestations of supernatural presence within the context of the Spiritualist movement. As noted, Victor Hugo made mediumistic drawings; so did the French dramatist Victorien Sardou (1831–1908), as did the proponent the theosophical system of thought Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891).[15] Other known mediumistic artists include David Duguid, Georgiana Houghton, Heinrich Nusslein, Fleury-Joseph Crépin, Margarethe Held, Marjan Gruzewski, Maria-Faustina Stefanini, Agata Wojciechowsky,

Fernand Desmoulin, Helen Butler Wells, Leon Petitjean, Miloslava Ratzingerova, and Hélène Smith. Today, art in the mediumistic tradition is still being produced by individuals such as the French artist and healer Marie-Jeanne Gil (born 1942) who has created hundreds of vibrant drawings as well as miraculous Polaroid photographs that she says are guided by "beings of light," and that depict spiritual beings, celestial lights, apparitions of the Virgin Mary, and other supernatural presences. Mediumistic art also is created and sometimes even taught through workshops in some Spiritualist communities, such as at Lily Dale, New York, Cassadaga, Florida, and Camp Chesterfield, Indiana.

The acclaimed art works of Spiritualists were inspired and produced within the context of a global religious movement that attracted millions of believers, and not entirely idiosyncratic expressions dislodged from culture. These works fascinated other members of the Spiritualist faith, who often embraced them as evidence of supernatural correspondence, praising or even desiring them for their religious value and meaning. Creating such art was central to the identities of many of Spiritualists, and Gill's work was linked to her reputation as a medium in her Upton Park neighborhood, as she held weekly séances in her home, created astrological charts, cast horoscopes, used the Ouija board, and offered prophecies to her neighbors.[16] Within the Spiritualist tradition, Gill and other individuals were not merely creating art. Their work was a communion with departed loved ones and spirit entities who provided guidance from a higher level of existence, imparting worldly or spiritual direction. Their trances and artistic endeavors, then, while in some cases shielding them from the sorrows of the earthly domain, also offered the possibility of community and a way to personally encounter otherworldly realms and address issues of existential concern.

Apocalyptic and Millennial Visions: Howard Finster, the Last Red Light before the Apocalypse

Although many types of religiously inspired individuals have expressed their visions artistically, in recent years those who have embraced apocalyptic views about the destruction and transformation of the world have perhaps been placed in the outsider-art category most enthusiastically. Numerous publications and exhibits have highlighted the work of end-of-the-world

visionaries. Among the more acclaimed of these artists are Howard Finster, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Norbert Kox, McKendree Robbins Long, Henry Darger, William A. Blayney, Z. B. Armstrong, Robert Roberg, William Thomas Thompson, Frank Bruno, Joe Coleman, Royal Robertson, and Myrtice West. A number of these individuals were included in the American Visionary Art Museum's 1997–1998 exhibit, "The End is Near! Visions of Apocalypse, Millennium, and Utopia" (Manley, 1998). The accompanying book, beautifully illustrated, includes brief commentary from the Dalai Lama and Stephen Jay Gould, among others, and short biographies of the artists, but relatively little contextual information about the apocalyptic and millennialist belief systems that influenced the artists' work. More recently, Greg Bottoms's lively and controversial travel memoir, *The Colorful Apocalypse: Journeys in Outsider Art* (2007) provides a chronicle of his encounters with apocalyptic outsider artists, all of whom are presented as case studies in borderline psychosis, and who in Bottoms's view have used art to cope with trauma or insanity, in an apocalyptic meld of "madness and Christian ecstasy."[17]

Like outsider art, apocalypticism frequently is equated with madness, fanaticism, and alienated outcasts existing on the social margins. Although apocalyptic beliefs are often mocked as irrational or depicted in stereotypical ways as a cult phenomenon, such ideas have been widespread throughout history and across cultures; they remain influential today. In the United States, apocalyptic belief has been enormously popular throughout the country's history. These ideas have an extensive legacy, central to the worldviews of the Puritans, various nineteenth century religious movements (the Shakers, the Millerites, the Native American Ghost Dance), and are regarded by some theorists as the ideological catalyst for early feminist consciousness, slave revolts, postmillennial social reform, and the American Revolution itself (Bloch, 1988: xiii). Today, millennialist ideas are an important aspect of the belief systems of various new religious movements, as well as the faith traditions of numerous Protestant denominations. They are also associated with Catholic apparitions of the Virgin Mary, New Age spiritualities, UFO religions, some environmentalist and eco-spirituality movements, and a wide range of other groups.[18] The pervasiveness of eschatological thinking is indicated by numerous polls, conducted over the past four decades, which consistently reveal that more than 20 percent of Americans believe that the world will end in their lifetimes, with a

significant number of people believing that the events predicted in the Book of Revelation are being fulfilled (59 percent) and that there will be an actual Battle of Armageddon (44 percent), the coming of the Antichrist (49 percent), and the Rapture of the faithful from the planet (44 percent).[19]

Although a significant amount of apocalyptic belief is generated within formal theological denominations, apocalyptic visions often have been expressions of popular religiosity, as a form of vernacular religion, existing at a grassroots level apart from the sanction of religious authority. Historically, such ideas frequently have been promoted by folk visionaries and prophecy interpreters who derive their authority from personal revelations or charisma. Self-taught and visionary artists who create apocalyptic art exemplify the vernacular and revelatory roots of much end time belief. In most cases these individuals are not isolated outsiders but are expressing ideas inherent in broader millennialist belief systems. Despite the pervasiveness of apocalyptic themes in the art of so-called outsiders, with a few exceptions, there has been relatively little analysis of the religious contexts and prophecy belief traditions that have influenced the art of these individuals, and even serious attempts to understand such beliefs often pathologize them as irrational, "medieval," or psychotic. Contrary to this approach, the religious belief systems of those regarded as quintessential outsiders may be seen to situate their creativity in specific social and cultural contexts as well as personal life experiences.[20]

Among the grand masters of apocalyptic outsider art, the Reverend Howard Finster (1916–2001) remains the most famous in the United States, known for his thousands of paintings, sculptures, and the two-acre Paradise Garden he created in his backyard in Pennville, Georgia (near the town of Summerville), a maze of sculptures and structures constructed from found and recycled objects—broken televisions, abandoned automobiles, discarded bicycles, water heaters, glass bottles, plastic toys, and anything else he could get his hands on. Motivated by his religious faith, and apparently fueled by a love for caffeine and chewing tobacco, he created more than forty-seven thousand numbered pieces of art. He became an international outsider-art celebrity, his reputation established by the numerous publications about him, exhibits of his work, and the promotion of his art by gallery owners, collectors, and celebrities. Finster was featured in *Life* magazine, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *People* magazine; he was a guest on the Johnny Carson show; and he designed album covers for musical groups such as the Talking

Heads and R. E. M. (who also filmed the video for the song "Radio Free Europe" in Finster's Paradise Garden). Outsider-art collectors, art-school students, rock-and-rollers, and evangelical Christians alike have made pilgrimages to his art environment to purchase his art, experience his outsider authenticity, or sometimes learn more about his religious views. Whether depicted as crazy or just lovingly peculiar, Finster was established as an outsider artist by the early 1980s; he has since been referred to variously as a visionary, a "classic outsider," a naïve artist, a primitive, and a folk artist (Finster preferred the last term).[21] Some viewed him as a backwoods William Blake, the Picasso of folk art, an outsider-art guru, or a character torn from a page in a Flannery O'Connor story, while others recognized him as a savvy businessman, a showman, or perhaps a tool of the gallery owners who promoted his work and the popular fascination with him as an eccentric Other, an authentic and rustic astronaut of outsider-art realms.

Painted sign advertising Howard Finster's Paradise Garden, with his World's Folk Art Church in the background, Summerville, Georgia, 1990s. Photograph Ted Degener.

However one thinks of Finster, his art blurs the boundaries between the categories of outsider, folk, self-taught, visionary, and contemporary art, and illustrates the fluidity of these categories and the ways they overlap and converge. Like Madge Gill, Finster also exemplifies the importance of understanding the complicated dynamics of vernacular religious expression, personal spiritual experiences, individual creativity, and the influence of cultural traditions. The extensive writings about Finster acknowledge his obvious spiritual motivations, but often focus on his unbridled creativity, quirky beliefs, unusual juxtapositions of imagery, or popular culture references (images of Elvis, Coca-Cola, and flying saucers) without much attention to the religious traditions that influenced his creativity. As historian Charles Reagan Wilson observes, this neglect of religious contexts extends to southern visionary artists in general. "Scholars of visionary art have placed very little stress on the specific church affiliations of their subjects, an attitude that would be incomprehensible to most black and white Southerners who live in a world of contending faiths, each with a specificity understood by those in their communities" (2007: 80).[22]

Finster's creative synthesis of the sacred and the secular, the personal and the pop cultural, gives his art a singular power that may appear completely idiosyncratic, but his work emerged within the context of the southern evangelical Protestant tradition of the farmer-preacher whose spiritual authority is based on private revelations and public demonstrations of faith rather than institutional religious training. Central to this evangelical worldview is the "born again" conversion experience involving spiritual rebirth and personal redemption through an encounter with the Holy Spirit, and the importance of proselytizing and saving souls from damnation.[23] This focus on a personal encounter with God's grace and power through revelatory and transformative experiences has provided a fertile religious landscape in the American South that allows for the expression of individual spiritual visions that nonetheless draw upon familiar beliefs and religious symbolism, the vernacular evangelical vocabulary of the region. The evangelical emphasis on the visible expression of one's religion and the open display of one's faith characterize the works of numerous self-taught visionaries from the South, such as Minnie Evans, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Myrtice West, William Thomas Thompson, Mary T. Smith, Royal Robertson, and the Reverend H. D. Dennis.

HAVING ABOLISHED IN
HIS FLESH THE ENMITY EVEN
THE LAW OF COMMAND
CONTAINED IN ORDIANCES
FOR TO MAKE IN HIMSELF OF
TWAIN ONE NEW MAN, SO
MAKING PEACE; CHRIST IS
THE PRINCE OF PEACE

Howard Finster's inlaid mosaic wall near the entrance of Paradise Garden, Summerville, Georgia, 1980s. Photograph Ted Degener.

Born in 1916, Finster was one of thirteen children growing up under difficult circumstances on a farm in Alabama, as his family lived off the land and used what they had in resourceful ways to survive. Like a number of other visionary artists, Finster experienced tragedy during his childhood. Five of his brothers and sisters died, including his sisters Abbie Rose and Gracie, to whom he was especially attached. His mentally disabled brother Ora, whom Finster took care of, died after being severely burned in a grass fire, a gruesome tragedy that Finster witnessed but was powerless to prevent (Finster and Patterson, 1989: 28–30). In reference to the tragedies that Finster experienced in his life, his youngest daughter Beverly said, "He did have lots of loss. There was thirteen children in his family, and a lot of them died before they ever got grown. Only a few of them ever got grown" (quoted in Bottoms, 2007: 13). Finster said that his first vision occurred at

the age of three after the death of his sister Abbie Rose; he saw her appear above the family tomato patch, twenty feet high and wearing a white gown, and she walked toward him, descending on steps that appeared and disappeared in the sky (Finster and Patterson, 1989: 32; Turner, 1989: 12–13). Years later he said that her appearance marked him as a "man of visions" who would help spread the gospel throughout the world.

WHEN PEACE SHALL BE TAKEN FROM THE EARTH
A FEELING OF DARKNESS. CREEPING
UP ON THE WORLD. INCREASING EVILS MUTIPLYING
THE AGE FOR A TURN AROUND OR FACE A DEAD END
IT IS NOW UP TO ALL EARTH PEOPLE TO CHOOSE
BY HOWARD FINSTER MESSINGER FROM GOD, WORLDS
MINISTER OF FOLK ART CHURCH INC. 2000 AND 258

Howard Finster, *A Feeling of Darkness*, 1982. Tractor enamel on wood, 20 ¾ x 34 in. (52.7 x 86.4 cm). Photograph Jim Prinz. Courtesy of the Arient Family Collection.

Although Finster's religious experiences have been sometimes depicted as anomalous or pathological, like millions of other evangelical Christians he had a born-again conversion experience that transformed him; in his case at the age of thirteen, during a Baptist revival, and he began to preach at the age of sixteen. He later travelled throughout the region, preaching at churches and tent revivals, often collaborating with Protestant evangelicals of other denominations at these revivals. After years of evangelical travel, he returned home to become a minister in his community, supporting himself and his family with local jobs as a carpenter, plumber, mechanic, bicycle repairman, and jack-of-all-trades. In 1965 he decided to retire from preaching. He was irritated that none of the attendees at his morning Sunday

sermon could remember the topic of his talk when he asked them later that evening. Abandoning the pulpit, he redirected his energy into the concrete religious art environment that he had created in his yard, a man-made Garden of Eden intended to display the miracles of God's creation. Over the next thirty years, he transformed the yard into Paradise Garden and added his five-story World's Folk Art Chapel in the early 1980s.

Howard Finster in his studio with his unfinished work, *Emage of Elvis at Three Years Old*, 1981. Tractor enamel on wood, 50 ¾ x 28 ½ in. (129 x 71.7 cm). Photograph Beth Arient. Courtesy of the Arient Family Collection.

Working on his own and pursuing his religious mission, in 1976, at the age of sixty, Finster had a transformative experience, one that is now well known in outsider-art circles and is part of the Finster legend. One evening, as he was rubbing paint on a bicycle he was repairing, he suddenly saw a small humanoid face in a smudge of white paint on his fingertip, and suddenly he had a divine feeling that told him to "paint sacred art."[24] Although unsure if he could paint at first, he obeyed his vision, and began painting. He soon created hundreds, and eventually thousands of works of art. For him, painting was a natural extension of his earlier preaching, with a didactic function: "There's really no big difference in what I paint and what I used to preach. See, I paint my sermons now. Now art is my church" (quoted in Turner, 1989: 122).

By the late 1980s, once Finster was embraced by the outsider-art world and the demand for his art increased, he began to speed up his production, using magic markers, templates, and family members to help him quickly prepare his paintings. This later work is subsequently less valued by collectors because of its repetitive nature and rapid production process. Although there may have been some economic motives for the assembly-line approach, in Finster's defense, his primary motivation for making objects was not to create unique and detailed works of art but to express his visions and spread the gospel in order to reach as many people as possible. Years earlier, when he was criticized by some conservative religious pundits for designing the *Little Creatures* album cover for the Talking Heads, a secular rock-and-roll band, Finster responded that he put twenty-six wholesome religious verses on the cover, and the album sold over a million copies. "I had twenty-six million verses go out and reach the world. That's more than I ever reached in the forty-five years I was pastoring. The rock-and-rollers are my missionaries" (quoted in Turner, 1989: 161–162). As a form of visual sermonizing, Finster effectively translated evangelical folk traditions and his own religious experiences into artworks that had enormous proselytizing potential. He concluded that his art was much more effective and memorable than his preaching. "I'd rather put one sermon out in art than fifty out of my mouth. . . . Preaching does very little good. But I find by doing it in art, a man will see it, and the message will be printed on his brain cells" (quoted in Turner and Dunham, 1985: 158).

Finster's work often is valued for the uniqueness and "strangeness" of the style, yet his art bears some resemblance to earlier Baptist "preaching

diagrams" and tent-revival posters traditionally used as a form of biblical instruction or as an advertisement to attract potential converts. Although he used the word "art" to describe his work, he also stated on numerous occasions that he was not an artist, but simply a messenger, an instrument of God's will, trying to communicate and save humanity from approaching apocalyptic annihilation, in the tradition of other evangelical ministers.[25] Just as Finster's paintings reflect his interpretation of southern religious traditions, so too is his seemingly outsider-art garden a creative innovation on regional traditions of roadside attractions and yard art, mosaic and statue garden art, and common proselytizing practice of religious sign painting, with messages such as "Jesus Saves" or "Repent," found on homemade roadside signs throughout parts of the South. His garden also may reflect mid-century American values regarding recycling, thrift, hard work, and resourcefulness—the idea of "waste not, want not" embraced and expanded upon with extreme enthusiasm.

Finally, although the apocalyptic themes of Finster's art and the accompanying texts may seem bizarre to those unfamiliar with evangelical and millennialist worldviews, his work draws upon familiar imagery from the Book of Revelation and other biblical texts as well as his own personal views of the last days. Within American Protestantism and Christian tradition in general, there are three primary forms of millennial belief, generally referred to as premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism. The concept of the Millennium, stemming from the Book of Revelation (Chapter 20: 1–6), refers to a thousand-year reign by Christ on Earth in which human suffering and evil will be eliminated and a golden age of peace and prosperity will be established. In the United States, these varieties of millennialism have been expressed in various ways, rooted in the Puritan history of the country, manifested in sectarian movements, and reflected in ideas about America as a redeemer nation with a special destiny in world history. *Premillennialism* (also referred to as catastrophic millennialism), is the most widespread and familiar expression of American apocalyptic thought, declaring that Christ's Second Coming will occur before the millennial realm is initiated. Prior to Christ's return, it is believed that various prophecies and signs predicted in the Bible will be fulfilled (such as wars, pestilence, famines, natural disasters, a period of tribulation, the rise of the Antichrist), and then the world will be violently destroyed and renewed by Christ, who will reign over the Earth for a thousand years. After

the millennial period, there will be a final battle in which evil will be defeated, the Last Judgment will occur, sinners will be cast into hell, and a new heaven and new earth will be created (Partridge, 2005: 281–288; Wessinger, 2000: 8–11; 2011: 4–6).[26]

In contrast, *postmillennialism* (also referred to as progressive millennialism) is characterized by the belief that a millennial period of peace, prosperity, and fulfillment will be gradually created by the faithful working to implement God's will. Once this golden age is achieved, Christ will return and the Last Judgment will take place. In this view, no apocalyptic catastrophe is required for attaining the Millennium; rather, it will be achieved slowly through the steady progression and the eventual triumph of Christian principles and the improvement of society brought about by religious revivals, social reform, and political action. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Protestant postmillennialist beliefs stressing the establishment of God's kingdom on Earth were widespread in the United States, and some postmillennial social reformers worked to eliminate slavery, child labor, the oppression of women, poverty, racial inequality, and other social ills which they regarded as impeding the establishment of the millennial kingdom (Bloch, 1988: xiii; Wessinger, 2011: 5–7, 15–17; Wojcik, 1997: 34–35).

Unlike other millennialists, *amillennialists* do not believe that there will be a literal and physical thousand-year millennial paradise established on Earth, but that biblical references to the Millennium are metaphorical and symbolic. The amillennial perspective (originally promoted by Augustine of Hippo [354–430 CE] in his book *The City of God*), is expressed in various ways, including ideas about the spiritual presence of Christ in the hearts of believers and the belief that Christ will physically return at the Last Judgment, when he will usher in eternity and destroy evil, as sinners are condemned to hell and the faithful join Christ in heaven (Wessinger, 2011: 16, 717).

The premillennial perspective is the most widespread among evangelical visionary artists in the South, as seen, for instance, in the work of William Thomas Thompson, Myrtice West, and Reverend McKendree Robbins Long. All were inspired by the Book of Revelation, with its graphic and mysterious images of apocalyptic portents, satanic beasts, and cataclysmic destruction. Finster embraced premillennial views as well, preaching of hellfire and brimstone and warning of imminent worldly catastrophe. Although he

portrayed beasts, rivers of blood, devastating earthquakes, and other end time signs described in Revelation, his depictions are generally less horrifying than those of other apocalyptic visionaries such as William A. Blayney or Norbert Kox, and sometimes even have humorous titles and witty commentary: *Hell is No Place for Nice People* (1983), *The Seven Devils* (1981; showing cheerful red devils waving and smiling with inscriptions such as "American devils are real friendly"), and *Find the Four Horses of the Revelation* (1975). The last painting depicts a ranch scene of dozens of colorful horses, with the apocalyptic four horses hiding somewhere among them, with Finster's entertaining scribbled comments about horses included on the piece. While apocalyptic, his art also emphasizes forgiveness and is populated with encouraging slogans, protective angels, and his famous white smiley-face "resting souls" images.

Finster's mission was not only to rescue the souls of sinners; he believed that his life's purpose was to save a doomed world, as a second Noah, a messenger who had visions like previous prophets warning of the coming cataclysmic events predicted in the Book of Revelation. "I have the whole world on my shoulders, and I feel responsible for this world, because its livin' out its Last Days, and I'm here as a red light to warn this world about all o' that. God sent me here to preach His Word in the Last Days, and to be a Man of Visions, and to tell the world 'bout my visions through my sacred art and my garden" (quoted in Finster and Patterson, 1989: 178). A number of Finster's paintings express his fears of nuclear annihilation and environmental destruction, his views of suffering and evil in the world, as well as his general sense of societal crisis and despair. "The reason I say I'm a Stranger from Another World is, the longer I live on this planet, the less I can adapt to it. . . . Here on this world there's nothin' for me except just a little scatterin'ly joy and fellowship, talkin' to my friends. And the rest of it is, 'Howard, your old friend died last night. They killed 250 of our soldiers. They put glass in the babies' food. They put poison in the sick people's medicine. They're talkin' 'bout World War Three.' This world is just an awful place, when you get to studyin' about it. This world's in trouble. The poor people gettin' poorer, and there's gettin' to be more and more jobless people, and they're doin' ever'thing they can, but they don't know what to do" (quoted in Finster and Patterson, 1989: 183–184).

While Finster's traditional apocalyptic message reflects his own sense of crisis and trauma in the world, his views are less doctrinal and dogmatic than

are those of premillennialists who adhere to strict fundamentalist and dispensationalist orientations, such as Jerry Falwell, Hal Lindsey (author of the influential *Late Great Planet Earth*), and Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins, the authors of best-selling *Left Behind* series of books, which have sold more than 65 million copies. Unlike these dispensationalists, Finster was not preoccupied with an unalterable timetable of doom. Instead, he was more concerned with preventing worldly catastrophe and saving humanity, and in this regard he exemplifies a type of conditional or avertive apocalypticism, in which worldly catastrophe is predicted but also holds out the hope that the destruction may be prevented or forestalled if human beings engage in specific spiritual actions and change their ways (see Wojcik 2011). Finster saw himself in the tradition of Old Testament prophets who warned the wayward in attempts to prevent their destruction; he identified with the story of Jonah who delivered apocalyptic prophecies to the Ninevites, and who was successful in getting them to repent and thus saving them from annihilation. When he was asked in the early 1990s whether he thought the world would end soon, Finster felt that the end was near but that it still could be averted. If humanity would change it ways, “then God could change them plans. There wouldn’t be no end of time” (quoted in Girardot and Viera, 1994: 50).

YOU ARE NEVER THREATING ABOUT ATOMAC WAR IN HELL.
JESUS CAST SEVEN DEVILS OUT OF ONE WOMAN
YOU WILL NEVER SEE CHRISTIAN PUNISHED KILLED OR BURNT HERE FOR WORSHIPING GOD.
AMERICAN DEVILS ARE REAL FRIENDLY.
ONCE YOU ARE HERE IN HELL YOU WILL NEVER FORGET IT.
YOU CAN HAVE A HELL OF A TIME RIGHT IN YOUR OWN HELL IF YOU LIK SMOPE AND FIRE
I TELL THEM LITTLE SINS IS O.K.
I TELL THEM IT.S NO HARM
I PROMIS THEM A GOOD TIME
YOU CAN CRY WITHOUT TEARS ON HELLS PLANET
YOU WANT LOOSE NO TIME DRINKING WATER HERE
YOU CAN SMOKE HERE WITH OUT A PIPE
I TELL THEM TO LIVE IT UP THATS ALL THEY WILL GET
THE DARK AND LONELY NIGHT ON THE DEEP CORNER OF WEST HELL.
I TELL THEM THERE IS NO HELL AND A FEW BELIEVE IT.
I GET MORE PEOPLE IN HELL. I TELL THEM THERE IS A GOD AND A HEAVEN BUT THEY HAVE PLENTY TIME SO THEY GO FOR IT AND PUT GOD OFF IT.S SO EASY TO PUT GOD OFF AND ITS THE MOST DANGERIOUS SIN. SO I THE DEVIL WIN.
I TELL THEM THERE IS NO GOD BUT NOT MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE IT.
I HAVE PASSED THROUGH HERE AND MY THROAT JUST CLOSED UP AND MY EYES BURNED WITH RUNING TEARS FOR I KNEW THAT JESUS MY LORD HAD ALLSO PASSED THROUGH HERE.
2000 AND 95 PAINTINGS SINCE 1976
YOU WANT BE TROUBLED WITH PRISON GUARDS HERE FOR NO ONE EXCAPES HERE.
BY HOWARD FINSTER WORLDS MINISTER O FOLK ART CHURCH MAN OF VISION

Howard Finster, *The Seven Devils*, 1981. Tractor enamel on wood, 22 x 30 in. (56 x 76.2 cm). Photograph Jim Prinz. Courtesy of the Arient Family Collection.

Finster not only embraced premillennial and avertive apocalyptic ideas, but asserted that the collective actions of human beings could redeem the planet. “We’re right in the time when we could live like we was livin’ in Heaven. . . . If the people would all turn to God, I have a feelin’ this nation could be reinstated from the fall of Eden. This could even be an eternal planet if all the people actually come to God, because that’s what happened in the days of Nineveh” (quoted in Finster and Patterson, 1989: 186–187). In this way he expressed seemingly postmillennialist ideas as well, with the promise of a millennial paradise and the establishment of a thousand year period of peace. “This is what I am all about here trying to get peace in the world and get the world a thousand more years to live here” (quoted in Goekjian and Peacock, 1998). To complicate things further, art historian Carol Crown suggests that Finster may have embraced amillennialist views, and perhaps believed that Jesus would return in apocalyptic glory simply to judge the world and send sinners to hell and the righteous to heaven, and that there would be no millennial kingdom established on earth (2007: 56).

Finster's beliefs run the spectrum of apocalyptic belief, a mash-up of millennial thought that subverts and confuses the standard typologies proposed by scholars of millennialism. One might simply dismiss his beliefs as wacky or abnormal, but it is exactly his variable and creative approach to belief and art that makes him so interesting and relevant, as his views are rooted in tradition, but also informed by his own unique interpretations and his personal experiences. In this way, Finster demonstrates the interplay between tradition, innovation, creativity, and folk and outsider categories, and he illustrates how belief systems are constructed by individuals at a personal level. His eclectic beliefs exemplify the concepts of "lived religion" and vernacular religious practice, understood as the ways that individuals interpret, embody, and express their beliefs in the context of everyday life, often apart from institutional doctrines and authorities.[27] This perspective places particular emphasis on the role of individualistic creativity, the dynamics of constructing belief systems, and the personal understanding and negotiation of belief. Considering Finster within the context of vernacular religious theory, he becomes less of an idiosyncratic outsider, and more like other individuals who have crafted religious belief systems that relate to their own experiences and understanding of the world, apart from theological forms of institutionalized religion. Finster expressed his own grassroots form of regional Christianity in the tradition of those southern evangelicals who accept doctrinal differences and are less dogmatic than fundamentalists. As Finster explained it, "I'm just kinda an independent-like fellow. I'm a Baptist but I believe in all religions" (quoted in Turner, 1989: 30).

Other aspects of Finster's belief system are further afield from evangelical traditions, such as his belief in life on other planets based on his visionary experiences of travel to those planets, as well as his assertion that he was "a stranger from another world," reincarnated and sent on Earth to help save humanity.[28] These unconventional beliefs have received special attention from writers and helped to bolster his eccentric outsider-art status in publications and outsider-art shows, where Finster is sometimes labeled an "extraterrestrial Baptist." Finster interpreted his dream-like space travel experiences in terms of biblical passages, finding evidence in the Bible for the possibility that God had created life on other planets. Since the early 1950s, when flying saucer beliefs proliferated, visionaries and UFO enthusiasts alike have searched the Bible for suggestive references to

unusual celestial phenomena that might indicate the existence of extraterrestrial life and spaceships, such as Ezekiel's vision of revolving wheels making a rushing noise, the light that blinded Paul on the way to Damascus, or the star of the East that glowed brightly over Bethlehem. Finster's ideas about life on other planets may have been unique in his community and far-out for outsider-art collectors, but he is not alone in such beliefs, with various polls estimating that 40 to 50 percent of North Americans believe in flying saucers and life on other planets.[29]

And while Finster's claim of travelling to other planets is unusual, it is far from unique. There is an entire religious history of individuals who believed they had journeyed to other worlds. Moreover, his experiences resemble the shamanic journeys, dissociative states, and out-of-body experiences associated with numinous religious experiences across cultures. Within Christianity, ideas about travel to other planets and encounters with advanced civilizations began with the Swedish scientist and Christian theologian Emanuel Swedenborg who, like Finster, had visionary experiences of life on various planets, and claimed to converse with planetary spirits as well as angels and demons. Some Spiritualists (such as Hélène Smith, 1861–1932), also communicated and depicted their visions of life on other planets and were mediums for these otherworldly beings on occasion. Subsequent marvelous journeys to other worlds have been a mainstay of flying saucer beliefs since the 1950s, reinforced through science fiction literature, films, and pulp magazines. Finster was familiar with Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, the *Twilight Zone*, and other popular-culture space-travel lore. His beliefs about life on other planets may not typify evangelical Protestant traditions, but they are clearly situated within the larger American popular culture milieu of extraterrestrial life and space travel, refracted through his visionary views. Finster's engagement with American popular culture accounts for much of his appeal and is reflected throughout Paradise Garden and in thousands of his art pieces, which include images and commentary about Elvis Presley, George Washington, Henry Ford, John F. Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Santa Claus, Coca-Cola, and a wide range of other popular icons and personalities.

Howard Finster, *Man of Vision Found in Hosea 12-10*, April 1978. Enamel on plywood, 48 x 15 ⅞ in. (121.9 x 40.3 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum; gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr., and museum purchase made possible by Ralph Cross Johnson (1986.65.111).

Even though Finster created his art outside of the mainstream art world, he was no cultural isolate, but a gregarious evangelical preacher in tune with popular culture, which he embraced and interpreted in terms of his own visionary experiences and then used to expand his ministry. Within his local community, there were some who considered him crazy and thought his environment was eccentric, while others admired him for being an individualist and a deeply religious man, viewing his "obsessive" creativity as a sign of his faith; some bought his work because of its religious

themes.[30] Elementary school children took field trips to his garden; Finster gave musical performances on his banjo for visitors; and he conducted dozens of local marriages and baptisms there. He regularly decorated the environment with images and objects that people gave him, such as personal photographs that he used in mosaics or embedded in cement, some of which may still be seen today, even though much of the garden now exists in a state of swampy decay. As his reputation grew, the art world came to Finster, with non-stop visitors descending upon his sacred environment, and he was invited to give lectures at museums, universities, and outsider-art events. The constant flow of neighbors and visitors to his garden in its heyday further connected him to others, as he would give them entertaining tours.[31] Ultimately he became a local folk hero, a part of the heritage and identity of the community. Finster's published scrapbook about his life is filled with the photos and acknowledgements of his family and many friends, further showing his connection to others and refuting notions of the disconnected outsider, a label that he did not like (Finster, 1989). A rural preacher with a sixth grade education, Finster's inspired innovations on existing traditions resonated with people throughout the globe. By the end of his life his work had journeyed from the outskirts of the art world to mainstream cultural awareness, from outsider to insider.

James Hampton and *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly*

James Hampton (1909–1964) is among the most celebrated of American artists depicted as outsiders, as the creator of a massive, shimmering throne sculpture that was discovered after his death, entitled *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly*. Art critic Richard Hughes has said that Hampton's sculpture "may well be the finest work of visionary religious art produced by an American," while others have alternatively described Hampton as a "kook," a "psychotic creator," and a singular outsider beyond definition.[32] Like Howard Finster, Hampton was spiritually motivated by millennial beliefs to create something extraordinary, but unlike Finster, there is relatively little biographical information about him and no interview material that clarifies his motivations. We know he was born in Elloree, South Carolina, a small rural community of mostly

African American tenant farmers and sharecroppers. His father was an itinerant, self-ordained Baptist minister and gospel singer who apparently abandoned his wife and four children to preach the gospel in the 1920s. In 1928, at the age of nineteen, Hampton, like many African Americans at the time, moved north during the Great Migration to search for work, settling in Washington DC, where his older brother Lee lived. For a while he was employed as a short-order cook in several cafes, until he was drafted into the United States Army, serving from 1942 to 1945 as a carpenter and airstrip worker with the noncombatant 385th Aviation Squadron in Seattle, Texas, Hawaii, and the jungles of Saipan and Guam. After he returned to Washington, he worked as a janitor for the General Services Administration, a job he kept until his death. He lived alone in a small room in a boarding house. He has been described by the few people who knew him as a soft-spoken and quiet man who got along well with his fellow workers and showed no signs of mental aberration. Although he mentioned his hope to find a “holy woman” to help him with his visionary project, he never married. By all accounts, he seemed to have few close friends except for his brother Lee.[33]

James Hampton, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*, c. 1950–1964. Gold and silver aluminum foil, Kraft paper, and plastic over wood furniture, paperboard, and glass; 180 pieces in overall configuration, 10 ½ x 27 x 14 ½ ft. (3 ¼ x 8 ¼ x 4 ½ meters). Smithsonian American Art Museum; gift of anonymous donors.

At some point, Hampton began to have visions of God and other supernatural beings, and these visions continued throughout his life. The first vision that he recorded in his notebook occurred when he was twenty-two years old, in 1931: "This is true that the great Moses the giver of the 10th commandment appeared in Washington DC, April 11, 1931." A significant event that seems to have triggered Hampton to create the *Throne* was the sudden death of his brother in 1948. During the period of grief and bereavement after Lee's death, Hampton began to craft the initial pieces for the *Throne*, in the form of various plaques and sculptures of winged creatures (Gundaker and McWillie, 2005: 173). He had made one small plaque while stationed in Guam, but during the time he was grieving over his brother's death, he filled his cramped room with sculptures. In 1950 he searched for a larger space for his work, and rented a garage, which had

formerly been a stable, in an alley nearby where he began to construct his sculptural monument. Over the next fourteen years, he devoted much of his spare time to building the *Throne* in this unheated, poorly lit garage. After finishing his janitorial job at midnight, he often would work for five or six hours until dawn on his sculpture. The sacred object that he created, spectacular and glittering in silver and gold, is approximately twenty-seven feet in length and ten feet high. It consists of a large, central cushioned throne surrounded symmetrically by dozens of smaller thrones, columns, altars, pulpits, winged objects, plaques, and twenty-five heavenly crowns, all made out of found items such as discarded furniture, cardboard boxes, insulation board, glass jars, light bulbs, sheets of plastic, and electrical wire. Above the central throne is the biblical injunction "FEAR NOT." The objects to the right of the central throne refer to the New Testament and Jesus, and those on the left to the Old Testament and Moses. Hampton carefully wrapped these objects (180 total), in gold and silver foil collected from wine bottles, cigarette packages, and gift wrapping that he had scavenged from the street and from the trash at his workplace.

James Hampton, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*, c. 1950–1964 (detail of throne chair with the biblical injunction "Fear Not" and other inscriptions). Smithsonian American Art Museum; gift of anonymous donors.

James Hampton in the rented garage where he constructed *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*, c. 1950–1964. Unidentified photographer. Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Various parts of the sculptural assemblage are labeled in English and in a secret language of Hampton's own invention, perhaps inspired by the cryptic language in the Book of Revelation. The inscriptions on the labels refer directly to biblical prophecy, judgment day, and the creation of God's millennial kingdom, and were communicated to him in visions and visitations from Jesus, Moses, angels, and the Virgin Mary. In his writings, he recorded that God and other beings appeared in his rented garage to guide his creation, and he referred to himself as "Saint James, Director of Special

Projects for the State of Eternity." Hampton's belief in divine guidance and his sense of a spiritual mission are similar to other religiously inspired artists in the evangelical tradition, in which visionary experiences are valued and common. Hampton wrote the following words from the Book of Proverbs (29:18) on a bulletin board in his workshop: "Where There Is No Vision, The People Perish." He also filled a small notebook with his secret symbols and holy script that experts have not been able to decipher. He was still adding to the *Throne* at the time of his death from stomach cancer at the age of fifty-five.

After Hampton died, his *Throne* was discovered by his stunned landlord, and it was later donated to the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC. Some time after its discovery, the *Throne* was hailed as a masterpiece of outsider and visionary art, and described as "the first major psychotic creation to enter an American museum" (MacGregor, 1989: 262). Although Hampton's construction is unique, there is no substantive evidence that he was psychotic, and his throne certainly was not conceived in a cultural void. Like numerous other self-taught artists inspired by the Book of Revelation, Hampton clearly based his work on biblical prophecies about the millennium, particularly St. John's vision of God seated on a silver and gold throne surrounded by angels, as well as references to judgment day, the crowns to be worn by the saved, and other events described in Revelation. Hampton's writings make evident his interest in the premillennial dispensationalist views that were popular at the time among some evangelical members of the African American community, and he titled his small notebook *Saint James: The Book of the 7 Dispensation*. The premillennial worldview, which divides history into seven epochs that humanity must pass through, asserts that God tests and communicates with humanity in varying ways during each of these dispensational periods. One of these dispensational epochs ended with Christ's death, the next will conclude with Christ's return in the Rapture, and the final will result in the establishment of Christ's millennial reign on earth. As various scholars have discussed, premillennial beliefs such as dispensationalism often have appealed to the poor and the oppressed throughout history, offering the promise of worldly transformation and the end of current suffering and injustice.[34] The *Throne* is rooted in broader millennialist views, just as Hampton's visionary experiences are rooted in religious traditions in which

spiritual calling, direct experiences of the divine, and revelatory communications with supernatural beings are accepted.

James Hampton, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*, c. 1950–1964 (detail of right side of throne with three throne crowns and three tablets). Smithsonian American Art Museum; gift of anonymous donors.

Hampton attended various churches in the city. Apparently he disliked the idea of a denominational God, and he told people that he wanted to become a minister after he retired. It is not known if Hampton built the *Throne* specifically for Christ's arrival on earth in his Second Coming, or whether he intended it to be a teaching tool in African American churches in

his neighborhood or in a storefront church that he hoped to establish, perhaps converting the garage into a storefront ministry. According to a co-worker and friend named Irene Watson, Hampton would hold private religious services by himself on Sundays in the garage. She stated he did not keep his work a secret and was proud of it; he enjoyed showing his sculpture to acquaintances, although he never proselytized or pushed his beliefs on others. He had talked to various African American ministers about putting the *Throne* on display in their churches, but none of them showed any interest (Foy and McMurrer, 1975: 67).

Despite the lack of interest in exhibiting the *Throne*, local African American religious culture is reflected in its construction, revealed by some of the labels attached to parts of the sculpture. Hampton seemed particularly influenced by the minister A. J. Tyler and his Mt. Airy Baptist Church. Tyler wanted his church to be a monument to Jesus in the nation's capital, a city of monuments, and Hampton included the phrases "Monument to Jesus" and "Tyler Baptist Church" on the labels fastened to the *Throne* (Hartigan, 2000: 33–34). In addition to its references to Tyler's church, features of the *Throne* resemble the interiors and altars of various storefront churches in Hampton's Shaw neighborhood, as well as the decorated altars used in people's homes at the time. In her attempt to contextualize Hampton's work, art historian Lynda Hartigan argues that Hampton was inspired by the altars of both storefront churches and rural black churches, and that the various objects surrounding the throne clearly resemble a personal evangelical church environment, with the construction of an altar, pulpits, a mercy seat, offertory tables, plaques, and pedestals for flower vases (2000: 34). Like his other creations, Hampton's accompanying *Book of the 7 Dispensation*, with its mysterious symbols and incomprehensible writing, is not incriminating evidence of his mental instability as some have suggested, but apparently inspired by biblical references and modeled on Saint John's account in Revelation in which God told him to record his visions of the last days in a small book in a cryptic language. Various other self-taught visionary artists in the South have used mysterious script in their works, including Minnie Evans, whose drawings sometimes contain cryptic writing, and J. B. Murray, who began writing in an indecipherable script after he experienced a vision from God. Such spiritual scripts may be a syncretism of Protestant African American practices of "writing in the spirit" and West African-based

traditions of protective spirit writing that have been documented in parts of the South (Padgelek, 2000: 21–30).

Created from found objects and debris, the construction materials used to create the *Throne* reflect the economic hardship that Hampton experienced, like many other African Americans who migrated north at the time. But his choice of materials also may have been influenced by regional traditions that discouraged throwing things away and that emphasized recycling, as well as by the graveyard art in his hometown of Elloree, which similarly included found objects such as jars, light bulbs, and tinfoil, like other African American graveyards and religiously inspired art. Hampton's use of certain shapes and materials, including diamond symbols, jars, reflective objects, and linear and script-like patterns may even reflect evidence of African concepts and aesthetics, such as the "flash of the spirit"—the visual tradition from the Central African Kongo region that historian Robert Farris Thompson famously argues is still surviving and thriving in African American vernacular art (1984). In a study of African American "yard work," theorists Grey Gundaker and Judith McWillie also document the widespread use of reflective materials and forms of "flash" that are associated with joy and heaven in yard art environments: "invocations of divinity—of glory, the light of Heaven on earth," a convergence of older, transatlantic African notions that have melded with Christian concepts and symbolism associating Jesus with divine light and illumination, as in "the light of the world" (2005: 181–183).

Although current scholarship provides some understanding of the contexts that influenced Hampton, he is still frequently depicted as eccentric and idiosyncratic, if not insane. We will never know Hampton's exact motivations and beliefs concerning the *Throne*, but like other religious visionaries throughout history, he used the resources at hand to express his deep faith and communicate his vision to the world. Transforming trash and discarded debris into a divinely inspired sculpture, Hampton created a sacred environment with extraordinary ingenuity, drawing on and innovating upon evangelical and biblical traditions. The fact that Hampton and other visionary artists express singular interpretations and works of art illustrates the very nature of vernacular spirituality, as individuals construct and negotiate beliefs based on personal experiences, knowledge of traditions and doctrines, participation in religious services, and their own imaginative skills.

African American Vernacular and Religious Art

James Hampton is but one among many African American artists labeled as outsiders based on their perceived eccentricity, marginalization, lack of education, or the religiously motivated nature of their work. Although some have argued that such art may be considered "outsider" because it exists outside of dominant white society and institutional art worlds, these artists are not outsiders in terms of the influences of their own specific African American cultural traditions; therefore, the outsider-artist label is simply unacceptable and racist in this context. As Robert Farris Thompson states, the term is an "arrow in the heart" of African Americans, who have been marginalized throughout American history and treated like outsiders by dominant societal institutions (quoted in Fine, 2004: 31). In some instances the artists themselves have categorically rejected the outsider label, as in the case of the carver and mosaic maker David Philpot: "I resent it . . . but I also understand it, like racism or hatred. I've been labeled all my life—fat, black, ugly, and stupid—by the insiders. Now I'm an artist. But now I'm an outsider artist" (quoted in Patterson, 1994: 13).

In recent years, the term *vernacular art* has been proposed as a replacement for outsider art, along with an effort by some scholars to contextualize such art in terms of African American religion, regional traditions, and possible African influences and aesthetic traditions that have been perpetuated and transformed in the United States. The word *vernacular* also has been proposed as an alternative to *folk* in attempt to avoid the sometimes marginalizing and romanticizing implications of that term. Derived from the Latin *vernaculus* (native), vernacular has been applied to cultural expression that is "home born" or "native born" and different from those forms of expression that are associated with dominant institutions and positions of power. When used in reference to language, the term refers to everyday language or dialect, native to a region, as spoken by people and as distinguished from official languages, whether national, literary, professional, or foreign languages. In this way, vernacular designates actual language "in use" as well as other everyday cultural forms such as architecture, foodways, art, music, costume, or beliefs that are native to a particular place or group. Although increasingly accepted within some disciplines, the concept of the vernacular sometimes has been assigned class-based negative connotations as vulgar, "low," and inferior, and is therefore

criticized by some scholars as an offensive term because of its link to enslavement and colonialism. Despite these criticisms, the term has been reclaimed by cultural theorists such as Houston A. Baker Jr. and Henry Louis Gates Jr., who have argued for the discursive power of the vernacular and its importance in understanding the complexity of African American literature and expressive culture.[35]

When used in this manner, the notion of the vernacular acknowledges the local and "home-based" historical and cultural influences on human expression. Recognizing the emergent qualities of such expression, an understanding of the vernacular considers individual creativity and personal expression in relationship to social and cultural background and issues of region, class, race, power, gender, and education. As personal expression rooted in local cultural vocabularies, vernacular artistic creation reveals the dynamics of cultural influences and individual expression, continuity and innovation, and alternative and institutional cultures. As writer and curator Randall Morris tells us in his exploration of the cultural sources of Martin Ramírez's work, "The vernacular artist's intentionality is born in his own *homeground*. The work is vernacular because it represents the artist's personal response to the combination of culture and place . . . and the location of the artist's interior place (his self-location) with the language and information of that culture" (2003: 54).

Art associated with trance states and claims of divine inspiration illustrate the ways that visionary artists draw upon the homeground of the vernacular. Based in personal spiritual experiences, such art illustrates the relationship between individual genius and the influence of religious traditions and cultural roots. In these direct experiences of the supernatural, whether recognized as "feeling the spirit" or "getting the call," a voice or spirit often commands these artists to create things, sometimes when they are in a waking state, but frequently during a dream or a trance state. In other instances, individuals describe having an intuitive feeling or an inexplicable spiritual need that compels them to start making things. Of the numerous African American artists inspired by such experiences, one the most well-known is Minnie Evans (1892–1987), whose vibrant depictions of exotic creatures, lush flora, angels, and mythical, Eden-like worlds in organically symmetrical forms were based in her visions and dreams, and initiated by a voice that told her to "draw or die." Another acclaimed artist is Elijah Pierce (1892–1984), whose direct experiences of God inspired his woodcarving,

which he regarded as a divinely guided way to spread the Word. Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900–1980) was called by God to preach and share the gospel, and she became a street preacher in New Orleans who used vivid drawings and paintings as well as music to express her religious mission. William Edmondson (1870–1951), the first African American to have a one-person show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (in 1937), said that he was commanded by God in a vision to carve religious imagery on limestone gravestones and sculptures.

As various writers have argued, the art created by African American visionary artists is not only infused with distinctive aspects of African American spirituality, but possibly older African beliefs about spirit beings mingling freely with the living to guide artists, or as an animistic power permeating all things, in a creole of Christian and perhaps Native American traditions.[36] For instance, Bessie Harvey (1929–1994), from Alcoa, Tennessee, began creating things after having visionary experiences and a sense of spiritual calling related to an illness and various life traumas, including an abusive marriage and the difficulties of raising eleven children. She had visions for most of her life, and started seeing faces, souls, and figures in the natural world, which she believed was alive with God, spirits, and presences. She then began forming haunting, anthropomorphic sculptures from branches, roots, shells, and other found objects to bring out and free the inherent spirit and form within, a process that she explained was personally therapeutic. Harvey's art might seem completely individualistic, but objects made from roots and natural materials have an extensive history in African art, and gnarled and twisted roots traditionally have been used as charms and for healing in African American folk practice (Adele, 1989: 78). For example, a twisted root, or a "black snake root," is known as "High John the Conqueror" (Wahlman, 1987: 380). Although Harvey's art expressed biblical themes, she also called her work "Hoodoo" and clearly considered some of her sculptures to be an expression of African traditions and folk beliefs. The use of roots and branches with protective and healing powers as well as associations with African "roots" is seen in the work of other African American artists, such as Steve Ashby, Ralph Griffin, and Willard "The Texas Kid" Watson.

Bessie Harvey, *Faces of Africa, I*, 1994. Paint on wood with wood putty, shells, and marbles, 32 x 25 x 13 in. (81.2 x 63.5 x 33 cm). Collection American Folk Art Museum, New York. Blanchard-Hill Collection; gift of M. Anne Hill and Edward V. Blanchard Jr. (1998.10.24). Photograph Gavin Ashworth.

Jesse Aaron (1887–1979) also worked with roots, and saw faces and figures in wood that he believed were put there by God and that he would "bring to life" through his carving. Like Harvey, Aaron suddenly began creating after a period of hardship during which his wife lost her sight and his family had tremendous debts, leaving him overcome by feelings of helplessness. In the middle of one night in July, 1968, "the Spirit" woke him up and commanded him to carve wood, and he spent the next decade

creating expressive faces and figures. Visionary experiences likewise informed the art of John Bunion (J. B.) Murray (also spelled Murry, 1908–1988), a farmworker who lived in Glascock County, Georgia. In 1978 at the age of seventy, he had his first vision and understood that he was "called" to spread the word of God. Although unable to read or write the English language, he began creating divinely inspired script, often drawing it on market receipts, bank calendars, old envelopes, and other scraps of paper. During the next ten years, Murray produced more than fifteen hundred drawings, paintings, and writings that he said communicated the language of the Holy Spirit as sent directly from God. His depictions of elongated figures and wavy shapes have a ghost-like character; his works represent notions of heaven and hell, protection from evil, spirits and those lost souls who have strayed from God, limbless and floating in abstract spaces. Only Murray could decipher the mysterious spirit calligraphy, which he interpreted by viewing it through a bottle of "holy water" drawn from his well (a practice perhaps based in African American folk traditions). He said that God created the script by guiding his hands and Murray shared his divine gift with members of his local Baptist church. Similar script practices have been documented throughout the South, possibly related to African protective script writing or the evangelical tradition of "speaking in tongues," a visual form of glossolalia (Padgelek, 2000: 21–32; Wahlman, 1987: 32–33).

J. B. Murray and an early painting, c. 1978–1980. Tempera and marker on wallboard, 24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm). Shown in the background is the script Murray wrote on the side of his house, Glascock County, Georgia. Photograph Andy Nasisse, courtesy Mary Padgelek.

The art of Mary Le Ravin (1905–1992), a healer and preacher, was similarly inspired by religious visions, guided by the Holy Spirit and her dreams to create fantastic sculptures from animal bones. Throughout her life she participated in various spiritual traditions, a number of which emphasized ecstatic religious experiences. She endured much adversity over the years and later started a storefront church in Los Angeles, cooking and ministering to the poor and homeless. Her art was rooted in her personal interpretation of the biblical meaning of bones as symbols of resurrection and life and death, and perhaps in African-based beliefs about bones and their spiritual power. She regarded her special preparations, secret adhesives, and spiritual use of bones as a sacred process, received through visions, and she saw faces, figures, and life forms within the bones. In addition to religious themes, her art pays tribute to African culture and African American heritage, leaders, and celebrities, and draws attention to issues such as racism, rape, homelessness, the struggles of women, and other forms of social injustice.

Royal Robertson (1930–1997 or 1936–1997, birth year given variously by Robertson) was motivated to create art by visions of a different kind, related to the trauma of his wife Adell's leaving him after their marriage of nineteen years had deteriorated. Emotionally devastated, Robertson began recording his visionary experiences, which commanded him to warn humanity about the approaching apocalypse, the treachery of women, and other impending threats. Like other grassroots millennialists inspired by Revelation, he envisioned an apocalyptic cleansing of an evil world that would eliminate all suffering and establish a new era of perfect harmony and love. He filled his yard and eventually covered his house in Baldwin, Louisiana with signs that contained attacks on Adell as well as biblical quotes, condemnations of prostitutes, drug dealers, and the government. He also began drawing futuristic cities, spacecraft, space people, and scenes of life on utopian planets that he said were records of trance visions, out-of-body journeys, and dreams that had transported him to other worlds. While Robertson's yard contained an ever-changing array of signs condemning Adell and adulterous spouses in general, the inside of his house contained images of devotion to Adell, and his depictions of lost love, angelic beings, prophecies, Amazonian superheroes, and visionary architecture covered nearly every inch of the interior walls. The mixture of visionary experiences, apocalyptic beliefs, and troubled emotional states inevitably have consigned

Robertson to the outsider-art category, but his art is clearly rooted in cultural knowledge and his social milieu, most obviously his training as a commercial sign painter and his avid interest in biblical prophecies. But other influences appear in his work as well: science fiction comic books, African American yard shows, evangelical Christianity, the occult and flying saucers, girlie and pin-up magazines, correspondence art courses he took, and aspects of local Louisiana culture that he experienced throughout his life. His art making, infused with cultural sources and publically displayed for the local community, emerged out of emotional collapse and personal suffering, an anguished attempt to cope with inner pain and overwhelming feelings of loss.

Royal Robertson in his home with his paintings, Baldwin, Louisiana, 1990s. Photograph Ted Degener.

Mr. Imagination (Gregory Warmack) with his bottle cap art and paint brush faces in his home in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 2005. Photograph Ted Degener.

Frank Albert Jones, *Untitled*, c. 1968. Colored pencil on paper, 24 x 26 in. (61 x 66 cm). Collection of Steve and Clara Smiley. Courtesy of Webb Gallery, Texas.

An individual transformed by tragedy was Mr. Imagination (born Gregory Warmack, 1948–2012), whose devotion to art making was renewed after he was robbed and shot in the stomach in 1978. He had always made art, but after going into a coma for six weeks and having a life-changing near-death experience, Mr. Imagination dedicated his life to creating things from carved sandstone, bottle caps, paint brushes, buttons, wood, and other found objects. His work, inspired by visions and vague memories of soul travel to ancient civilizations, expresses his pride in his African American heritage, a sense of royal African ancestry, and his fascination with Egyptian themes. His visionary experiences were difficult to articulate in words, but he was able to express them through art making. “Sometimes I feel there is something which does not allow me to talk about the visions,” he once said, “so I can only talk about what I have seen in my art. It all comes from this

coma" (quoted in Cubbs and Metcalf, 1996: 52). Recycling became a metaphor for his own rebirth and survival as he gathered the refuse of everyday life and transformed junk into mythic and majestic jewel-like thrones, walking staffs, faces of black kings, and totems (Cubbs and Metcalf, 1996: 52–53). His art helped him deal with other hardship and suffering, such as the sudden death of his brother and the loss of his art and raw materials in a house fire in 2008. Mr. Imagination saw himself as a minister of recycled art and a healer teaching the world about the value and beauty of cast-away things, which represent the personal and spiritual renewal of one's life and community.

The relationship between visionary experiences and creativity also is evident in the life and art of Frank Albert Jones (1900–1969). Jones was born "special," with a caul (part of the fetal membrane) over his left eye, which he was told would allow him to see spirits. Belief in the gift of visions and the supernatural abilities of people born with the "spirit veil" is widely known in African American folk belief and in various other traditions. Jones took this prediction of second sight seriously, as he saw spirits throughout his life, an ability that became the source of his illustrations of "devil houses" and supernatural beings. Jones's life was beset by tragedies: he was abandoned on a street corner when he was three years old; as a young man, he was unhappily married to several women in turn, all of whom seemed to exploit his passive personality and faithful devotion. Later, he adopted an abandoned three-year old girl, but was then accused of raping her by the wayward mother when he refused to give up the child four years later. He was sentenced to five years in prison. Things only got worse: in 1949, Jones was convicted of being an accomplice in a murder even though there is no evidence he was involved. Then he was charged with rape again, another apparently phony charge. In 1960, he did violate his parole and as a result spent the remainder of his life in prison in Huntsville, Texas.[37]

In the mid-1960s while in prison, Jones began salvaging paper from the trash and stubs of red and blue colored pencils discarded by prison bookkeepers, with which he drew his visions of "haints" (haunts) and the spirit world. The creative process had a noticeable calming effect. He drew whenever he had the chance and said that his images formed of their own accord, as the pencil moved by itself. "I don't know how I do them, I just draw what I see" (quoted in Steen, 1992: 11). His drawings seem to mirror the prison experience, with enclosed, multi-celled, and barbed-wire-like

structures, and the persistent image of a clock in many of the works, perhaps a depiction of the large clock in the prison yard where he worked and drew. Jones created these precisely patterned diagrams in attempt to protect himself from evil forces, both the real dangers of prison life and the ever-present spirit fiends that he envisioned. He was familiar with Hoodoo beliefs, and as a means of protection he created his own mojos, juju bags, and other fetish objects. His art seems to be an extension of these protective African American traditions of confusing or capturing evil spirits. His "devil houses," drawn in the "protective fire" colors of blue and red, entrap most of the deceptive smiling devils inside their structures, although a few spirits usually remain free, fluttering around the perimeters (Steen, 1992: 13–14, 23–25). In the midst of misfortune and cruel conditions, Jones endeavored to construct order through his art and gain a sense of personal control over the oppressive forces that besieged him. Despite his circumstances, he was not a complete cultural isolate, but an individual who attempted to make meaning of the world as understood through the lens of his cultural heritage and African American visionary traditions, drawing upon these to creatively express his own visions and life experiences.

There are numerous other individuals labeled outsider artists whose work is rooted in religious contexts and vernacular traditions that are ignored or misunderstood by Western art enthusiasts eager for forms of expression that appear bizarre, inexplicable, or uncommon. For instance, the work of the Taiwanese painter Hung Tung (1920–1987) is often associated with outsider art, and although his paintings express his unique and self-taught style, they also reflect folk traditions, formal Taiwanese art forms, Taoist beliefs, and Tung's own religious life, including his experiences as a shaman and as a spirit medium. The internationally recognized Nigerian artist Prince Twins Seven-Seven (1944–2011) also is occasionally placed in the outsider-art category, based on his seemingly fantastic symbolism and the imagined formalistic similarities to canonical Western outsider artists such as Johann Knopf and Edmund Monsiel. Although influenced by his exposure to European art, Twins Seven-Seven (whose name signifies that he was the only survivor of seven sets of twins) explicitly drew upon Yoruba traditions, cosmology, and spirituality that were expressed through his own innovative, modernist, and masterful style.[38] Similarly, the elaborate fantasy coffins made by the Ghanaian Seth Kane Kwei (1922–1992) are sometimes considered idiosyncratic creations and may appear unusual from the

perspective of Western art dealers and collectors. However, these hand-made and painted coffins (called *abebuu adekai*, "boxes with proverbs") have now become traditional among the Ga people in Ghana, with religious and ritual significance. Created to represent the identities and professions of those who have died (a Porsche Carrera coffin for a successful business person, a boat coffin for a fisherman), these caskets are embraced as a celebration of the life of the deceased and viewed as means of transport to the otherworld. In a comparable way, the drawings of the Ethiopian cleric Gedewon Makonnen (1939–2000), now acclaimed among Western art collectors, is not divorced from cultural influences, but functions within the traditional context of talismanic illustrations. Created specifically to treat patients with ailments, his art is a form of visual medicine in which the artist, as healer, interprets and depicts the patient's problems, and then through the use of talismanic designs attempts to cure the individual. Like that of the other individuals discussed here, such art is embedded in cultural traditions transformed by personal innovations, individualistic expressions grounded in the vernacular, resulting in distinctive and meaningful artistic visions.[39]

Sacred Traditions of Haitian Vodou

The disregard for the influence of vernacular traditions and religious contexts is exemplified by the labeling of Vodou artifacts as outsider art. Created by practitioners of the Haitian religion of Vodou, these sacred objects have been identified as having the features of art brut and outsider art: stylistically potent, intense, erotic, crude, "exotic," and created by untutored individuals seemingly at great distance from recognizable cultural sources. Vodou things, valorized by some outsider-art aficionados, may appear bizarre to Western art dealers and collectors unfamiliar with the religious meanings and aesthetics of such art, which is sometimes characterized by an interlaced iconography of death, sex, saints, and recycled objects that may be shocking to Western sensibilities. Infused with African and indigenous aesthetics, and inspired by Catholic images and global popular culture, Vodou ritual art reflects the harsh realities of life in one of the most impoverished countries in the world. Variously described as "primitivist" and "naïve," the work of Haitian artists is now a regular feature at major outsider-art fairs, and a number of galleries have exhibited Vodou

art in an outsider-art context. At the Outsider Art Fair in New York City, for example, the work of Haitian artists such as Hector Hyppolite (1894–1948), Georges Liautaud (1899–1991), André Pierre (1915–2005), Lafortune Félix (born 1933), Antione Oleyant (1955–1992), Pierrot Barra (1942–1999), and Yves Telemak (born 1960) has been displayed with other objects classified as outsider art.

Despite the ways it has been represented and marketed, Vodou art is an expression of traditional and religious cultural beliefs and related objects that are part of the everyday lives of most Haitians. While many Vodou artists are indeed self-taught, the curiosity that their works hold for Western collectors and tourists seems to spring from the perceived strangeness of the Vodou elements and in some cases from the recycled, found-art quality of the pieces. Not all art created in Haiti bears a Vodou influence, but much of what is exhibited and sold as outsider art does contain references to the major religion of the island. What seems outré, attractive, or disturbing in Vodou-influenced art is often a matter of cultural misunderstanding or ignorance. Western conceptions of Vodou have always been fraught with Hollywood misrepresentations involving black magic, superstitions, curses, and pin-filled Voodoo dolls. As Donald Cosentino (1995, 1998), Wade Davis (1988), Karen McCarthy Brown (2001), and other theorists have shown, the religion of Vodou frequently has been represented in a dark and sinister manner that has very little to do with the religion as it is lived and practiced in Haiti. As a religion of oppressed and marginalized people, Vodou has remained largely uncodified, creating a sense of subterranean mystery in the minds of those in power, thus making the religion appear dangerous. This misapprehension also comes from the fact that Vodou iconography does contain imagery and symbolism associated with secrecy and death. Symbols related to Freemasonry are common, such as the All-Seeing Eye and the skull and crossbones, a survival of the influence of Freemasonry among the French colonists in the eighteenth century. Skulls and bones appear frequently on altars to Bawon Samedi, a darkly humorous divinity associated with death, the cemetery, sexuality, and rebirth. The assemblage style of many Vodou altars testifies to the various elements of Haitian history that have accrued and been combined in the emergence of the religion.

Vodou, as practiced in Haiti today, is a syncretic religion that combines beliefs brought over by slaves from the West and Central African countries of Dahomey and Kongo, combined with native Arawak beliefs and

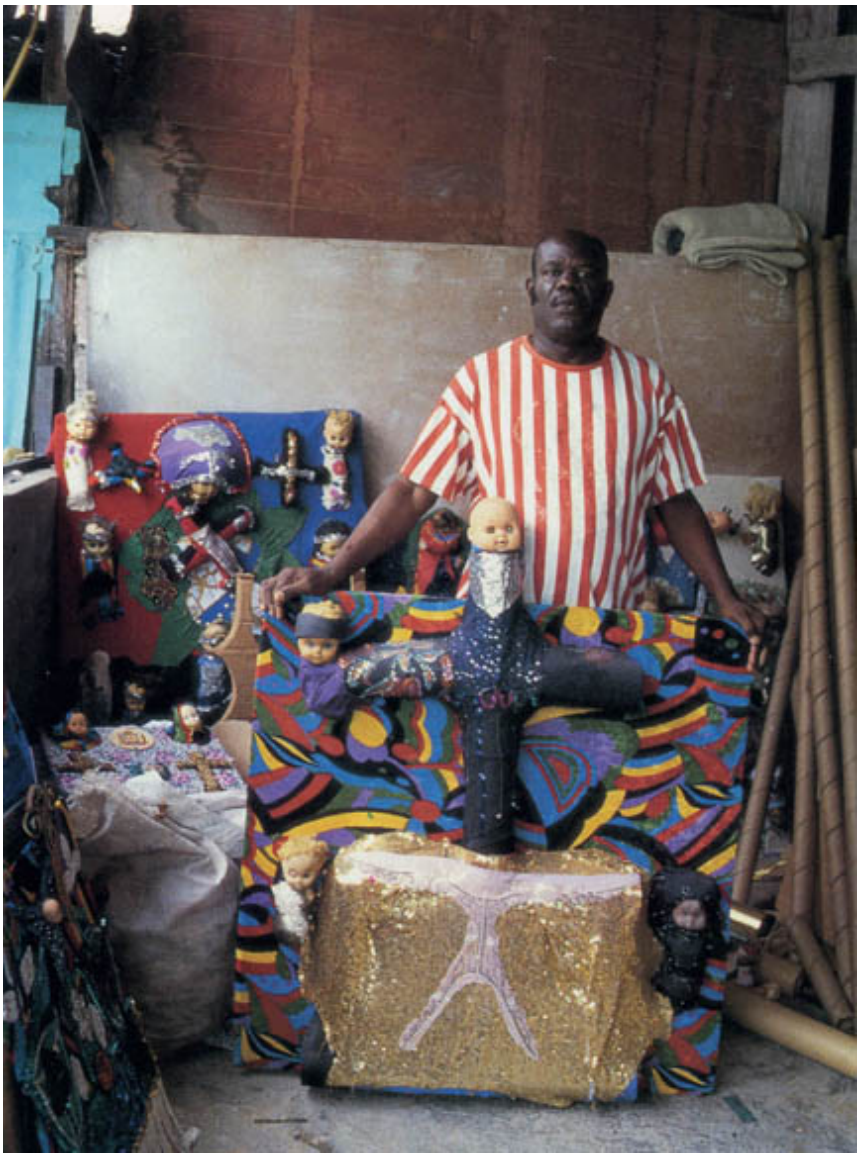
colonialist Roman Catholic imagery. While Vodou is a decentralized religion —a necessity during times of oppression—a shared belief is in a supreme being, *Bondye*, to whom nations of spirits, the *lwa* (also *loa*) act as intermediaries similar to the function of Catholic saints. The two most important groupings of the spirits are the *Petwo* and the *Rada*, "hot" and "cool" spirits, respectively. During a Vodou ceremony the lwa manifest themselves through the possession or "mounting" of a "horse," often either a *manbo* (female priest) or *oungan* (male priest). The lwa are easily recognized by their personality traits, which cover a wide range of human characteristics and emotions: Ezili Dantò is a protective mother and warrior; Gede is a trickster spirit who is associated with death and sexuality; Ogou is a disciplined military divinity, and so on.[37]

Altars to the lwa incorporate a variety of objects repurposed from everyday life and made sacred through a perceived correspondence to a personality trait of particular lwa. Altars to Gede may include rum bottles, black top hats, cigarettes, a Darth Vader action figure, and a chromolithograph of Saint Gerard, among other things. Cosentino, a folklorist and African Studies scholar, writes of Vodou altars:

> They are palimpsests of Haiti's twisted history, made coherent through the eyes of synchronous gods. To look at an altar cluttered with customized whiskey bottles, satin pomanders, clay pots dressed in lace, plaster statues of the saints or the laughing Buddha, holy cards, political kitsch, Dresden clocks, bottles of Moët et Chandon, rosaries, crucifixes, Masonic insignia, eye-shadowed Kewpie dolls, atomizers of Anais-Anais, wooden phalli, goat skulls, Christmas tree ornaments, and Arawak celts is to gauge the achievement of slaves and freemen who have imagined a myth broad enough and fabricated a ritual complex enough to encompass all this disparate stuff. (1998: 21)

Cosentino's description of the "disparate stuff" that can be found in Vodou altars points to the supreme adaptability of the religion. Long forced underground by oppressive colonialist regimes, Vodou survived by taking on the forms of Catholicism and popular culture. This is not to say that the creativity of Vodou is born wholly of the need for disguise, however; it has also emerged through the reconstructive aspects of the religion. Slaves transported to Haiti from Africa found themselves stripped of everything that had been familiar to them and placed in a strange land run by strangers from an oppressive culture who spoke a different language, enslaved them, and treated them in brutal ways. As an act of preservation in the face of this traumatic blow to African tribal identity, the slaves began to replicate their

old beliefs under a new system with the extremely limited resources available to them. Anthropologist and sociologist Karen McCarthy Brown writes that the trauma of the African diaspora threatened the traditional meaning of family, forcing Haitian slaves to search for boundaries between the categories “us” and “them” that now separated the slaves from their masters. Brown traces out the lines of this categorical divide through its replication in Vodou ritual practices, finding that the distinctions are embodied in ritual dance and reified in the construction of altars. Vodou collapses the Western mind/body, flesh/spirit split, and is focused on the body and its performative role in the maintenance of community and the healing of sociocultural trauma (1995: 212–218). Brown further suggests that this may shed light on the importance of dolls and the imagery of binding to the construction of Vodou altars and the creation of much Vodou art; these ideas and aesthetics are reflected in the altars and ritual objects created by Pierrot Barra, considered one of the most original Vodou artists in the world.



Pierrot Barra with his altars on the verandah of his mother's house near the Iron Market, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, c. 1994. Photograph Donald Cosentino.

Barra frequently has been referred to as an outsider artist, and he perhaps evokes this label in three major senses of the term: he was self-taught; as a Haitian artist he had little access to the Western sphere of mainstream art; and his creations were inspired by revelatory experiences. The work of Barra, the focus of Cosentino's *Vodou Things*, is astonishing to behold. Doll heads and limbs poke through brightly colored cloth speckled in sequins, bottles contain cast-off dolls with wings, and chromolithographed images of Catholic saints are juxtaposed with Mickey Mouse, skulls, Barbie, Godzilla, and Löwenbräu beer coasters, all combining to create a surreal and highly

kinetic assemblage. From the perspective of the Western art world, Barra's works may appear to fit the stereotypes of outsider, even pathologically inspired, art. The use of recycled debris and the salvaged items of capitalistic detritus bring to mind other creative bricoleurs who have been labeled outsider artists, such as Sabato Rodia, Nek Chand, Tressa Prisbey, and Tyree Guyton, discussed in the next chapter. Yet, in the context of the Vodou tradition, this method of construction is not that unusual. Nor is the visionary aspect of Barra's approach. Direct contact with the spirits in the form of possession states and revelatory visions is central to the practice of Vodou. When Barra tells Cosentino that his creations are shown to him in visions by the lwa themselves, he is speaking from a position solidly within the accepted norms and traditions of Vodou.

Pierrot Barra, *St. Gerard with Boss and Baby Djab*, 1995. Wood, fabric, metal, plastic, appliqué; height 41 in. (104 cm). Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photograph Don Cole.

Barra received his visions often from his *met tet*, or guiding spirit, Jacques St. Majeur, a warrior spirit and brother of Ogou associated with Saint James and various important figures from Haitian history. Barra's visions came to him in dreams, with the lwa speaking to him and showing him designs. "When I sleep, while I'm dreaming, I see the Mysteries," Barra stated. "When I sleep I see the lwa, the spirits, the signs moving like this. When I sleep, when I dream, they show me a design, . . . some face, some kind of thing" (quoted in Cosentino, 1998: 14). He then created these designs in waking life with the help of his wife, Marie Cassaise, a Vodou

priest as well. In what Cosentino calls Barra's "mojo masterpiece," a mojo board (a term coined to describe Barra's assemblages of good-luck charms affixed to cloth-covered boards), entitled "Cross with Spoon and Fork," features a prominent fork and spoon set against a cross in the midst of a cacophony of colors, sequins, and doll parts. The symbolism of the fork and spoon has been traced back to the French colonials, whose rigid and formal manners at the dinner table served metonymically to represent the master-slave relationship. The fork and spoon thus became associated with power and order, specifically in Barra's board with Bawon Kriminel, a spirit of justice and enforcement (Cosentino, 1998: 28–31). The rites and symbols of Vodou often speak to this tension between bondage and freedom, power and oppression. The abundance of dolls and doll parts in Barra's creations similarly points to a dynamic between freedom and constriction. His dolls are often tightly wrapped and bound in various materials, reflecting the importance in Vodou of the tensions between binding and "loosing," involving the containment, control, and flow of spirit powers.[40]

Pierrot Barra, *Untitled* (altar piece/repository for Ezili Freda), c. 1988. Doll, Godzilla figure, maraca, satin, sequins, tassels, velvet bows, costume jewelry, appliqué; height 21 in. (53.3 cm). Photograph James Wojcik.

While Barra's art serves various religious functions, Cosentino notes that it also was sold to tourists in downtown Port-au-Prince's "Iron Market," a ramshackle urban marketplace for vendors, and it seems that Barra may have dumbed down his art over time to cater to the whims of foreign customers (Cosentino, 1998: 41–43). Yet when Cosentino showed one of Barra's altars to a friend at that time, a Vodou manbo who owned a shop across the street from the Iron Market, she and several visiting oungans and manbos suddenly stopped talking and stared at the altar for a moment, and then began singing

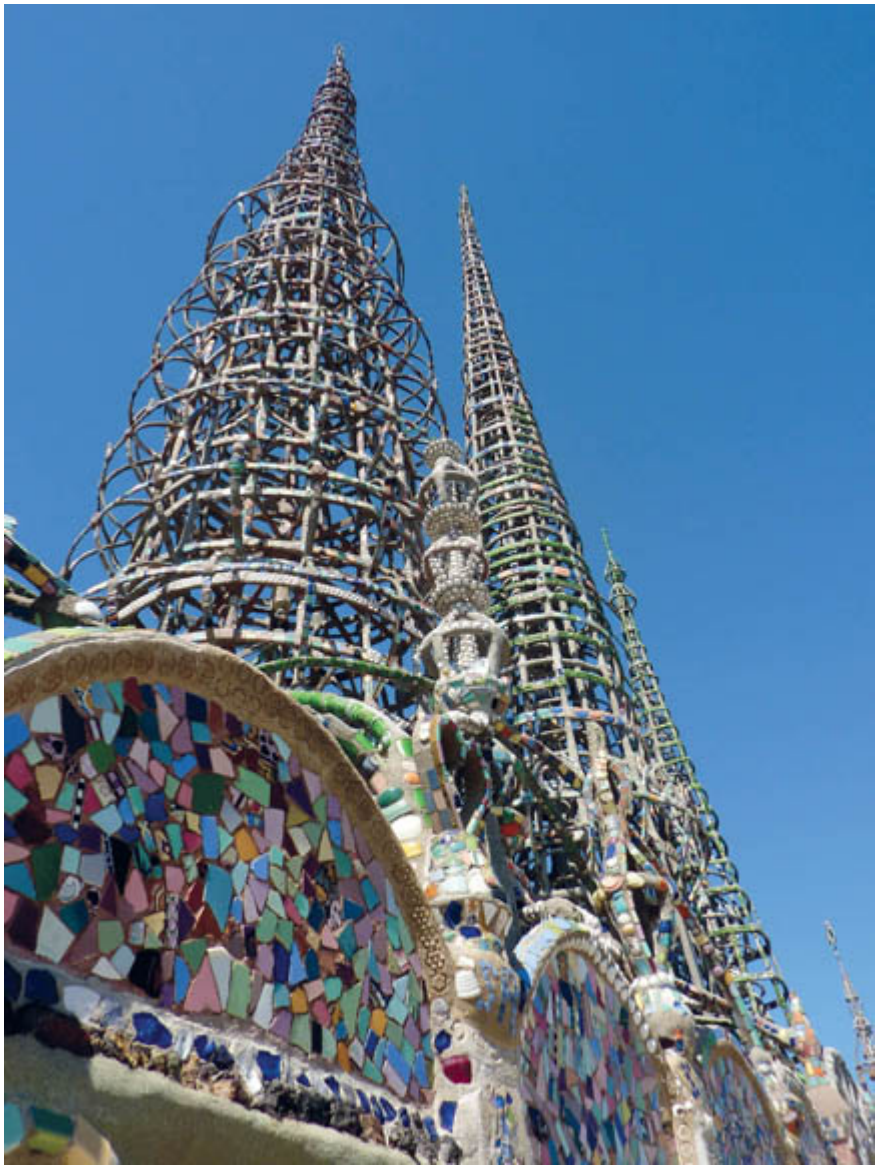
a praise song to the deity Ezili Dantò. When asked about the piece, those gathered explained that "it was not traditional, . . . but it certainly was Vodou" (Cosentino, 1998: 10). Barra's altars and assemblages, while innovations upon tradition, are recognized for their specific ritual and spiritual functions within the religious framework of Vodou; pedestrians bowed to them when passing by Barra's stall in the marketplace. His art is original, an experimentation within a tradition that is comprised of boundless innovation, and while he is considered a master of such creolizing ingenuity, there are many other Haitian artists who follow in his footsteps or stride alongside him, informed by Vodou aesthetics of bricolage, cultural appropriation, assemblage, and the sacralization of everyday objects. Such artists include André Eugène, Frantz Jacques (Guyodo), Jean Hérard Celeur, Didier Civil, Franz Zéphirin, and Edouard Duval-Carrié.[41] There are tens of thousands of Vodou altars and ritual artworks throughout Haiti, created in homes, hidden in urban spaces, displayed on the dashboards of taxis, and dispersed throughout the countryside. These altars may be made from found objects, but as Cosentino observes, "They are neither generic nor impersonal. Most express both idiosyncratic vision and the genius of the tradition" (2004: 535).

Pierrot Barra, *Cross with Spoon and Fork*, 1995. Wood, fabric, metal, plastic, and appliqué; height 49 in. (124 cm). Fowler Museum at UCLA. Photograph Don Cole.

Pierrot Barra, *Untitled* (Ezili Dantò sculpture), c. 1994. Wood, dolls, satin, plastic, sequins, beads, pins, metallic ribbon, and lace; height 54 in. (137 cm). Photograph Donald Cosentino.

The cultural and historical context in which Vodou was formed is one of assemblage and ingenuity itself, as displaced Africans were forcibly remade as slaves, violently severed from their homelands and their local traditions and beliefs. Through a process of bricolage, Vodou was shaped as a syncretic mix, an astounding accretion of culture and religious belief based in African traditions but drawing upon the iconography and traditions of the colonial oppressors. The result was the creation of something new, but infused with traditions, a vernacular religion with forms of sacred expression constructed through acts of remembrance, innovation, and opposition.

Like the works of religiously inspired visionaries, another mainstay of the outsider-art category includes the art environments built single-handedly by untutored individuals. The next chapter examines the lives and artistic motivations of several well-known builders who have constructed extensive environments from debris and recycled materials. Such constructions often provoke controversy within the local community, with their creators sometimes regarded as societal outcasts who are eccentric, idiosyncratic, or insane. Despite such depictions, these apparent outsiders and their often extraordinary environments are not entirely disconnected from culture and local communities, and we will uncover the influences and vernacular traditions that have inspired their monuments to individual ingenuity.



Chapter 4

Vernacular Environments

Recycling and the Art of Transformation

Anyone can do anything with a million dollars—look at Disney. But it takes more than money to make something out of nothing, and look at the fun I have doing it.

—Tressa "Grandma" Prisbrey
(circa 1960)

Solitary individuals who have created entire art environments have intrigued outsider-art enthusiasts for decades and remain central to the field's conceptual core. These often monumental environments, constructed by self-taught individuals, are considered by many to exemplify the outsider genre, as their creators are frequently motivated by personal visions and artistic impulses that persist for years, in ways that are viewed as compulsive, if not neurotic. Although widely different in style and construction, these large-scale environments and folk sculpture parks are usually built from a bricolage of found objects and recycled materials. Beginning in modest ways, the projects often expand over the years as their creators continually add to the work through a process of ongoing accretion. Such spaces may become the life-focus of their creators, an expression of the individual's energies, opinions, ideals, and dreams, or an attempt to construct a monument that outlasts death and renders them immortal. Entire homes and yards are transformed

into vernacular art realms, for the expanding environments may grow to encompass the whole living space of their creators, which may eventually double as both a studio and artwork endlessly under construction. These environments are holistic and organic works that may combine architecture, sculpture, painting, landscape design, assemblage, and mottos and words of wisdom, thereby blurring conventional artistic categories.

Since most of these environments are constructed in an inspired but makeshift manner with unconventional materials that quickly decay into a state of disrepair, few of these sites last long beyond the death of their makers. In many cases, such environments are impossible to preserve. The extensive resources and funding needed to conserve them simply do not exist, and community attitudes as well as granting agencies with funds for preservation are usually ambivalent, if not hostile, to supporting such places. The individual nature of many of these built spaces, involving ad hoc and unfamiliar construction techniques as well as the use of junk and discarded items, can disturb community and family members alike. In some instances, embarrassed relatives or members of the local community immediately demolish these environments after the death of the builder, as in the case of Armand Schulthess's Casa Reggio in Ticino, Switzerland, or Mr. H. Smith's garden of life-sized statues in Essex, England (Maizels, 1999: 16). While local hostilities may exist toward such places, the creators of these works are not necessarily isolated from their local communities. Their constructions often reflect vernacular influences and have been recognized by some writers as "folk environments," "grassroots art," and "visionary environments" indelibly connected to local and social contexts.[1]

Ferdinand Cheval's Palais Idéal, Hauterives, France. Photograph Emmanuel Georges. Copyright Collection Palais Idéal, Emmanuel Georges.

Widely disparate in form and intent, thousands of these environments have been documented throughout the world, with a particularly large number identified in France and the United States. This concentration puzzles theorists, who speculate that perhaps cultures emphasizing individuality and freedom from social control inspire such large-scale creative endeavors.[2] Although often regarded as unique and unprecedented, these art environments have antecedents in the centuries-old hermitages and "follies" as well as the large-scale garden constructions that were created in sixteenth-century Italy, exemplified by the Garden of Palazzo Orsini, in Bomarzo, which still exists today, featuring a fantastically sculpted giant mouth as an entrance. The aesthetic of assemblage and accumulation characterizing art environments also resembles folk constructions at grottos, sacred places, or pilgrimage sites, such as the Hill of Crosses near the city of Šiauliai, in Northern Lithuania, an ever-expanding and interactive environment of more than a hundred thousand crosses, statues, and religious objects placed there by pilgrims.

The first truly celebrated art environment created by one individual is the extraordinary *Le Palais Idéal* (Ideal Palace) built by Ferdinand Cheval (1836–1924), a rural postman with no training in architecture who constructed his *Palais* in Hauterives, in Southeastern France, from 1879 to 1912. Like many other environment builders, Cheval's desire to build an edifice was triggered by a precipitating event. Sometimes, such experiences —such as the death of a loved one or deep loss, a religious experience, or a life change such as retirement—spark the overwhelming desire to create something monumental. In Cheval's case, one afternoon during his postal route he tripped over a piece of sandstone. When examining the rock, he found its bizarre shape absolutely fascinating. He took the strangely shaped stone home and soon began searching for and collecting other stones with unusual shapes during his postal round. He regularly walked from fifteen to twenty miles a day in his treasure hunt, transporting the stones home in his wheelbarrow. Deeply intrigued by the fantastic forms and "caricatures" in these stones, he soon regarded them as incredible expressions of natural sculpture and decided to create a monument to display them. Previously in a dream he had imagined building something like a château or palace in which there were grottoes, but he never seriously planned to construct such a place until stumbling over a rock fifteen years later jogged his memory, illuminating the strange beauty of stones, as well as that of the natural world, as a creative force. "Well, if nature can sculpt so easily," he proclaimed, "I am sure I can master masonry and architecture. Here then was my dream at last. 'To work!' I said to myself!" (quoted in Durrell and Willis, 2004: 338).

Cheval began his work with rudimentary tools. Untrained in masonry, he developed his own construction techniques by using a combination of wire, cement, and lime that he mortared into organic and elaborate shapes, meticulously pressing each of his collected stones and shells and other objects into the wet cement. He worked alone on his structure in his spare time for thirty-three years, often late into the night, without electricity, using a candle that he attached to his hat to light his work. Over the years, Cheval gradually built a massive palace that includes pillars, beasts, giant figures, sculptured flora and palm trees, and a grotto-like crypt with a shrine that honors the wheelbarrow he used to transport his beloved stones and other found objects. At the time, Cheval's creation was dismissed as an eccentric "folly." In his writings he recounts being mocked by the locals and considered a madman, and yet he seemed to understand it all: "Tongues

started wagging in the district. . . . ‘A poor fool filling up his garden with stones.’ . . . People laughed at me, blamed and criticized me, but as this kind of insanity was neither contagious nor dangerous, nobody thought it worthwhile calling in the mental doctor and so I was able to indulge my passion freely in spite of everything, turning a deaf ear to the scoffing of the crowd, for I knew that people always ridicule and even persecute men they don’t understand” (quoted in Thévoz, 1995: 32).

Years later, Cheval was hailed as the “Hieronymus Bosch of Cement” and championed by the Surrealists, particularly André Breton, and the *Palais Idéal* became a source of inspiration to Max Ernst, Anaïs Nin, Pablo Picasso, and André Malraux, among others. For Breton and the Surrealists, the *Palais* was the expression of psychic automatism in sculptural form, a manifestation of the unconscious flowing free from rational control, unhindered by societal restrictions and artistic conventions. As Breton put it, “The postman Cheval remains the undisputed master of mediumistic sculpture and architecture” (quoted in Cardinal, 1972: 151). The recognition brought by Breton and other members of the avant-garde helped gain public appreciation of Cheval’s creation. Still, the reverence for the *Palais* as a supreme example of mediumistic expression, vividly connected to the maker’s unfettered creativity or unconscious mental states, also contributed to ongoing assumptions about the non-cultural and non-rational nature of art brut and outsider art.

Sabato Rodia and the Watts Towers

For decades, similar assumptions have been applied to the internationally known Watts Towers, an art environment created by Sam (Simon) Rodia in South Central Los Angeles. Rodia (1879–1965), born Sabato Rodia in the village of Rivottoli Serino, east of Naples, Italy, created a complex of seventeen structures, including three spectacular and ornate spires. The tallest, measuring ninety-nine and a half feet in height, is made of interwoven steel rods wrapped with wire mesh, then covered in cement and decorated with a colorful mosaic of found objects, including glass, porcelain, ceramic tiles, and sea shells. A scalloped wall covered with mosaic surrounds the environment. Inside, in addition to the three large towers, are four smaller towers, a gazebo, fountains, birdbaths, benches, walkways,

gardens, and a boat covered in mosiac. Rodia's towers are considered to be the largest structures ever made by a single human being working alone. As an essential part of the vernacular architectural landscape of Los Angeles, his towers have inspired individuals ranging from Ed Kienholz and Betye Saar to Niki de Saint Phalle, Don DeLillo, and Charles Mingus (who lived a block away from the towers and watched Rodia construct them with admiration).[3] Buckminster Fuller was another admirer, who claimed that Rodia was "one of the greatest sculptors of the twentieth century," an intuitive genius with an innate understanding of design and the principles of engineering (Goldstone and Goldstone, 1997: 3–5, 39, 50; Landler and Byer, 2006).

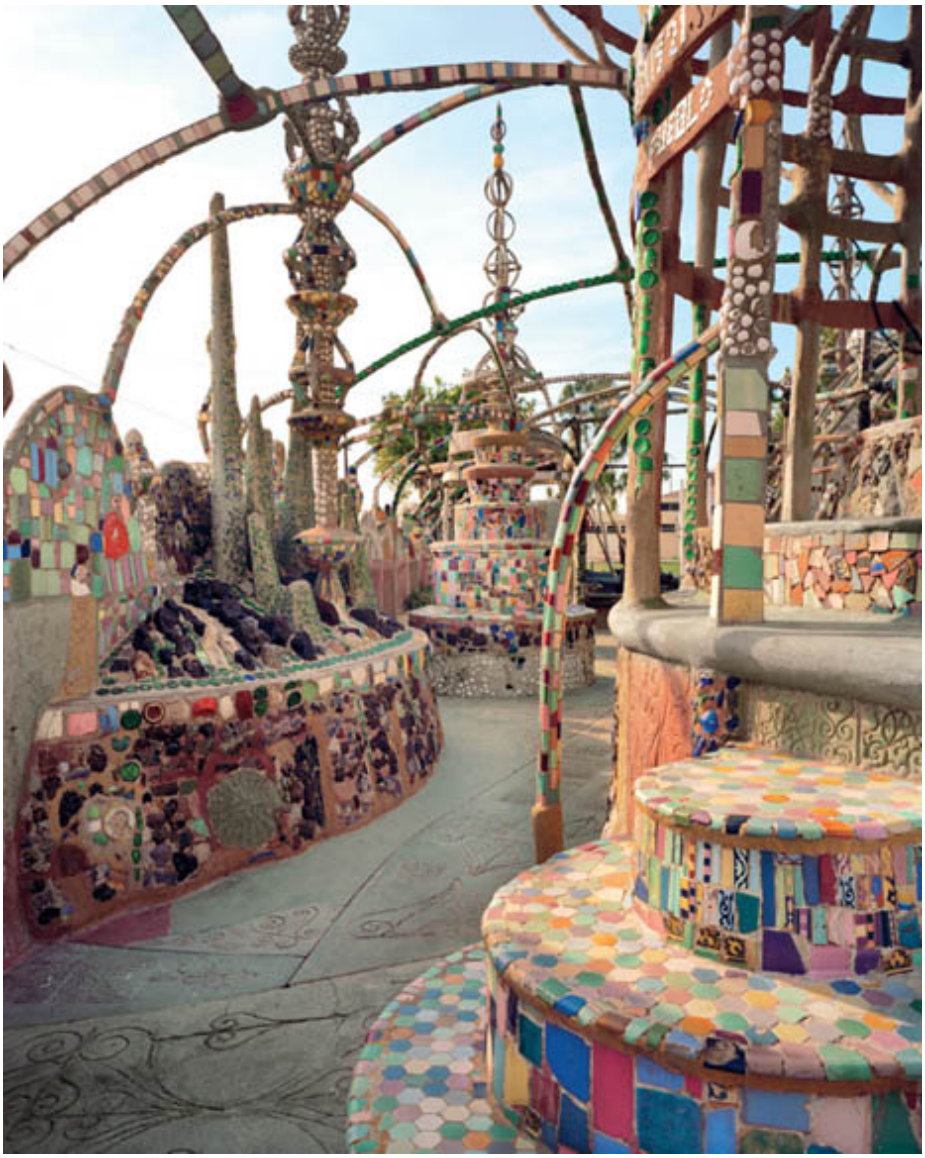
Like the postman Cheval, Rodia worked alone on his structures, apparently every day for thirty-three years, using sophisticated techniques of construction involving mortar, mesh, inlaid objects, and plenty of steel. He also was a master of bricolage, like Cheval, creatively harnessing whatever materials were at hand. Rodia, Cheval, Hampton, Finster, Chand, and other builders of art environments such as Raymond Isidore, Helen Martins, and Tressa Prisbrey embody the concept of the bricoleur as a do-it-yourself inventor, a resourceful jack-of-all trades creating with scrap, leftovers, and odds and ends. When discussing the ways that mythologies are constructed, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss specifically refers to Cheval and his *Palais* as an illustration of the concept of bricolage, the process by which an individual creator with limited resources uses available materials in new ways and creates things from miscellaneous objects salvaged from a variety of sources (1966: 18–19). Rodia drew upon the materials that were available to him too—broken pottery, tiles, glass, shells—and skillfully reused these cast-off objects in inventive ways, giving them new meanings in his stunning sculptural displays.

Sabato Rodia's towers, view from southeast, Watts, California. From right to left: the Apex spire, the Ship of Marco Polo spire, the East, Center, and West Towers. Photograph 1987, Marvin Rand Estate.

Sabato Rodia's towers, Watts, California, 1990s. Photograph Ted Degener.

Such techniques of bricolage are both celebrated and condemned. The practice does offend and outrage some communities. Weird assemblages of reused objects placed in strange new contexts, no matter how skillfully displayed, may unsettle or disturb neighbors unaccustomed to the unconventional use of "chaotic" debris. In the case of Rodia's towers, throughout the years of their creation, they were condemned as "a pile of junk," dismissed as "a giant three-dimensional doodle," rumored to transmit spy secrets to enemy forces during World War II, considered a product of psychosis, and almost demolished in 1959 (Trillin, 1965; Posen and Ward, 1985: 153). The environment not only evoked criticism and hostility because of its unusual nature and use of broken debris, but Rodia's thirty-three years of devotion to his object of desire, with no interest in financial gain, was puzzling, suspicious, and considered insane by some detractors. Rodia's social status as an illiterate, highly accented Italian immigrant and blue collar worker added to the perceived oddness and confusion about his towers, as Calvin Trillin noted in a 1965 *New Yorker* article: "If a man who

has not labeled himself an artist happens to produce a work of art, he is likely to cause a lot of confusion and inconvenience" (1965: 72).



Sabato Rodia's towers, view looking southwest. From left to right: the South Wall, the base of the Garden Spire, the B Tower, and the base of the West Tower. Photograph 1986, Marvin Rand Estate.

Sabato Rodia and his towers, c. 1950. Photograph James Reed, courtesy of Watts Towers Arts Center.

Discussions of Rodia's motivations for creating the towers are speculative: biographical information about him is sketchy and riddled with errors and contradictions. Rodia's own vague and conflicting comments about his construction further confuse things. It is known that his parents were landed peasants who sent him to the United States around the age of thirteen or fourteen—most likely to avoid being conscripted into the Italian army—a traumatic migration and perceived abandonment that he resented throughout his life. He lived in Pennsylvania with his older brother Riccardo, a coal miner, but his opportunities for work were limited because

he spoke no English and he might not have been able to read or write in Italian, either. He managed to find work, at first with his brother doing odd jobs in quarries, mines, and later, on construction sites. Sometime in the late 1890s, Riccardo was killed in a mining accident. Rodia, now alone in America, travelled west, having heard that Italians were treated more fairly on the West Coast. He worked odd jobs and then settled in Seattle, where he married Lucia Ucci in 1902. They had a child the next year. In 1904 or 1905, Rodia and his family moved to Oakland where a small Italian immigrant community existed. There he found work on a construction crew and Lucia gave birth to two more children.[4]

Rodia's life seemed to unravel in 1906 or 1907, when he apparently became an alcoholic. The few accounts of Rodia at this time describe him as bitter and opinionated, an anarchist angered by the way immigrants were treated, the suffering and plight of the poor, the wealth and hypocrisy of the Catholic Church, and the corruption of politicians and elected government officials. At some point in 1909, Lucia and he separated, apparently because of his violent and unruly behavior. Some biographers speculate that the death of his infant daughter Bel may have contributed to his heavy drinking and self-destructive decline (Goldstone and Goldstone, 1997: 31; Umberger, 2007: 112). He disappeared for a number of years, riding the rails, wandering the country as a hobo, and finding jobs as an itinerant worker. In 1912, Lucia finalized their divorce, and Rodia remained estranged from his children for the rest of his life, even denying their existence. During his wanderings, his mysterious and undocumented lost years, he continued his alcoholic ways; he may have gone to Mexico and fought in revolutions there, travelled into South America seeking employment, or according to one account, worked for the US Army Corp of Engineers during and after World War I (Rodman, 1982: 84; Landler and Byer, 2006). He spent some time in Texas, married a Mexican woman named Benita Chacon in 1917, and then moved to Long Beach where he worked for a building contractor as a tile setter and mason. When he lived in Long Beach, he built five colorfully decorated planters and created a large gazebo-like merry-go-round structure that partially surrounded his house. Benita left him in 1920 and the following year he married another Mexican woman named Carmen, a union that soon failed as well (Goldstone and Goldstone, 1997: 32–35). In 1921 he acquired a triangular piece of property on a dead end street in Watts for $900. Rodia supposedly picked this spot on 107th Street because of its

visibility as a nexus of transportation, for it was located thirty feet away from a Pacific Electric Railway Red Car Line (the Santa Ana Red Car) and a block away from another Red Car line, which transported as many as a hundred thousand people each week (Goldstone and Goldstone, 1997: 35; Landler and Byer, 2006).

When Rodia began building his towers, he was in his early forties, a failure as a husband and father, relatively poor, largely illiterate, and the only neighborhood Italian immigrant—"El Italiano." Neighbors remembered him singing arias from Italian operas, sometimes while he worked on his towers. By all accounts, he was at times hot-tempered, stubborn, and independent, and sometimes disregarded societal rules, such as when he installed a fire-engine siren in his car so he could race past traffic jams on his way to work (Goldstone and Goldstone, 1997: 39). During the early years of his project in the 1920s and 1930s, he had some friends in the neighborhood, which at that time was a semi-rural and working-class community of Anglos, Japanese, African Americans, Mexicans, Greeks, and Central European Jews. Neighbors remembered him as friendly, and he had some close Mexican neighbors across the street, but apparently few really knew him, for he tended to keep to himself and worked most of the time, fifty to sixty hours a week at his day job, returning home to work on his towers in the evenings, sometimes until 3:00 AM and nonstop on the weekends and holidays.

After World War II, Rodia appears to have lost some interest in building new structures, spending time instead repairing and cleaning the existing work. He was in his late sixties, and his neighborhood had begun to change: his Japanese neighbors had been sent to internment camps during the war and their farms were converted into residential areas or industrial plants; as the area became more of an urban sprawl, most of the earlier residents moved away. Importantly, by the 1950s, the transportation system in Los Angeles had changed entirely, as automobiles and buses had replaced the defunct Red Car lines and the thousands of commuters once passing by Rodia's towers were no more. As the neighborhood gradually became a ghetto, Rodia grew increasingly isolated. At some point after quarrelling with some former friends, he became even more of a pariah, and neighborhood teenagers, influenced by their parents' views about Rodia, began throwing rocks at him and his structures, breaking the windows of his house, tossing trash onto his property, or scaling the walls and sneaking inside the place for fun. By 1954, now in his late seventies, Rodia was tired

of it all, had suffered a stroke, and decided to leave. He deeded the property to one of his neighbors. Saying that he simply wanted to die among his relatives, he moved to Martinez, California, where his sister lived. During the last years of his life, his whereabouts were unknown to local Angelinos, but he was somehow discovered in Martinez by those interested in his towers. When asked again about his reasons for building the towers, he refused to talk about them, saying only, "If your mother dies and you loved her very much, you don't talk about her" (quoted in Trillin, 1965: 100).

After Rodia abandoned his sculptures, the towers fell into a state of disrepair, his was house burned to the ground, and parts of the sculptures were destroyed by vandals. The entire lot was condemned by the City of Los Angeles in 1957 as a dangerous and "unauthorized public hazard" that was built illegally without permits, and a demolition order was issued to flatten the structures. In 1959, a volunteer committee of individuals who understood the value of Rodia's creation rallied against its imminent destruction. A stress test was proposed to determine the stability of the supposedly dangerous structures. A steel cable was attached to the tallest tower, and slowly, increased leverage was applied to the structure, up to a ten-thousand-pound pull, equal to an eighty-mile-an-hour wind. At that point the steel cable attached to the tower began to bend, but the tower remained firm. The stress test was stopped, and the structures were declared safe and saved from demolition. Over the years, the strength of Rodia's towers have become part of local Angelino lore, which asserts that his constructions are among the most stable structures in Los Angeles: after the next massive LA earthquake, or the dropping of an atomic bomb, Rodia's towers will be the only thing left standing in Los Angeles, they say. Rodia was aware of the destructive power of earthquakes, and he fortified his structures after the serious 1933 Long Beach quake; his neighbors recount him actually working on the towers during subsequent tremors. As the ground shook and buildings trembled, they yelled at him to climb down from his towers, but he continued to work, unconcerned: "The earth was shaking and we told him to come right down. But he just laughed. 'It won't fall,' he said, and he was right" (quoted in Ward, 1990: 171).

Rodia's towers have not only survived earthquakes and demolition attempts, but also the riots that occurred in Watts in 1965; several nearby blocks were burned and leveled, but his constructions stood unharmed. In 1970, the Watts Towers Arts Center opened next to the site and has since

become a focus of community events, exhibits, workshops, youth arts classes, and festivals, including the Watts Towers Jazz Festival. The ongoing struggle to preserve the towers and make them accessible continues today. Over the years, the towers have been imbued with new meanings by becoming a site of contestation and controversy, reverberating with larger issues of race and politics. The Watts Towers are now regarded as a monument and symbol of a historically neglected community. Rodia's construction is largely embraced within the community as a symbol of defiance, struggle, hope, and creativity in the face of obstacles and oppression.[5]

Those unfamiliar with Rodia's life story often assume that he modeled his towers on the Basilica of the Sagrada Família in Barcelona, designed by the innovative Catalan architectural genius Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926), which is famous for its massive spires, organic style, and use of broken ceramic and pottery-shard mosaic work. Rodia, however, was no Gaudí imitator. He was unfamiliar with Gaudí's work, and when shown a book with a photograph of the Sagrada Família, he studied it with intense interest for some time and then responded, "This man, he had helpers?" When Rodia was told that Gaudí was assisted by many workers, he shut the book, unimpressed, and responded that he had built *his* towers all by himself (Morgan, 1984: 76).

The fact that the towers were constructed by one man on a human scale without scaffolding gives Rodia's structures an unusual aesthetic that has been praised by architects and designers. As sculptor Richard Oginz and engineer Bud Goldstone note, Rodia's sculpture is monumental without being mechanically monolithic, like the Eiffel Tower, because it expresses Rodia's own physical capabilities—his diminutive stature (he was four feet, ten inches tall), and it reflects his reach, his ability to lift materials, to balance on the structure as he built, and to climb to such heights to "create a monument at the extreme limits of his being, to go that far, and physically, no farther" (Goldstone and Goldstone, 1997: 20). Rodia used no machine tools, bolts, rivets, or welding. He constructed the skeletal frame of the towers entirely by hand with steel reinforcement rods, slowly building up from the lower tiers one level at a time. The structure was built like a spiral of laced concentric circles so that he could climb from section to section as he built upwards. He used the railroad tracks near his yard to bend the metal beams that formed the steel substructure, wedging them under the tracks and

leaning on them to get the shape he needed. He then carried them up the structure and bound them to the existing bar frames with chicken wire and wire mesh, sealing the connecting joints with cement. As the cement dried, he pressed the colorful objects that he had collected into the mortar, a grand total of more than eleven thousand pieces of pottery, fifteen thousand glazed tiles, six thousand pieces of glass, ten thousand sea shells, clamshells, and abalone shells, as well as rocks, marble, electrical wire, and anything else that he found aesthetically interesting (Goldstone and Goldstone, 1997: 56). He seemed especially attracted to the saturated colors of certain objects, such as particular kinds of tile, the dark blue of milk-of-magnesia bottles, and the deep green of Bubble Up and 7 Up soda pop bottles. Years later, in a desperate attempt to gain funds to preserve Rodia's towers, advocates actually solicited the 7 Up Company for support, claiming that the innumerable shards of broken 7 Up bottles covering towers made the structures the largest monument to 7 Up in the world (Trillin, 1965: 100).

Rodia's structures are covered in glass. Fascinated by the way that glass could be transformed from a solid to a liquid and then into solid form, he melted and fused his collected glass in his fireplace, creating new shapes that he would place into his sculptures (Ward, 1990: 157; Hernández, 2001: 33). He was constantly gathering objects for the outer surface of the structure and enlisted the help of neighborhood children, whom he would pay with cookies or pennies when they brought him things. He also journeyed to the beach to gather objects, sometimes on the weekends, walking more than twenty miles to San Pedro or Redondo Beach to hunt for decorative objects, and other times taking the Pacific Electric Red Car that ran by his yard to the end of the line at the Pike, a boardwalk and amusement park on the ocean, where he would search for sea shells. He would fill cloth sacks with his discoveries, then walk back to Watts on foot alongside the tracks, another twenty mile trek, searching for broken glass, pottery, tile, and interesting stones. According to a Watts Towers tour guide, Rodia's hands were so worn from placing these objects into his structures that by the time he finished building the towers, he no longer had any fingerprints. Rodia's complete devotion to building his structures is described by art critic Jules Langsner, who wrote an article on Rodia in 1951. Later, he recalled his meeting with him: "He was completely indifferent to his appearance. . . . He had on an old shirt with the sleeves cut off at the shoulders, and his arms were just covered with bits of glass, dust from the chipping, all embedded in his arms as they

were in the towers. It would have taken weeks of steam baths and scrubbing with wire brushes to get it off. He didn't seem to notice it. He lived in a self-enclosed world, and he had a fantastic obsession—a monument. He wanted to be remembered" (cited in Trillin, 1965: 78).

Rodia was notoriously vague about his motivations for creating his self-made world, and he never clearly articulated his reasons for building the towers. Perhaps he felt limited by his lack of English, or maybe there were no words to accurately describe thirty-three years of solitary work on a project that had some deeper meaning. In many ways, he was a societal outsider—someone marginalized by his ethnicity, his illiteracy, his social class, political views, and unconventional behavior. Rodia's marginal status, the lack of information about him, and his enigmatic nature contribute to the popular misconception that the towers are completely idiosyncratic, outside of cultural influences, and unlike anything else in the world.[6] While some writers have placed Rodia in the outsider-art category, other art critics celebrate his structures as expressions of modernist art trends, enfolding him within the perspective of the assemblage art movement, with Rodia as a creator of "reality fragments" and his towers as a multivocal work that exposes "the fictional nature of representational aesthetic strategies" (Smith, 1996: 30).[7] Although Rodia's towers are certainly assemblages and may be embraced as an inadvertent critique of the aesthetics of representation, they did not grow out of modernist art theories but were created by an unschooled immigrant, unaware of art-world trends, who had a profound need to express himself. A closer examination of his life and his towers reveals the often ignored and subtle cultural influences that shaped his ingenious creativity. Rodia's towers are imprinted with traces of his personal and cultural memories, shaped by his extensive skills learned as a laborer, and express a unique style and vernacular vocabulary that is not readily apparent.

Despite the romanticist claims that Rodia somehow was completely free of cultural influences in creating his towers, there is convincing evidence that the style of his structures is based in part on his experiences as a child growing up in Southern Italy and his exposure to the ornate processional towers and boats constructed for the *giglio* of the Nola festival, an annual celebration in honor of St. Paulinus, the patron saint of the village of Nola near Rodia's birthplace. Every June 22, the members of the community honor the safe return of St. Paulinus from slavery by parading and dancing through the streets with eight eighty-foot tall cathedral-like *gigli* (meaning

lily in Italian) and a ceremonial boat that are carried on the shoulders of hundreds of community members.[8] As folklorists I. Sheldon Posen and Daniel Franklin Ward have observed, the overall structure, size, and details of Rodia's towers greatly resemble the wood and papier-mâché *gigli* constructed in Nola, and his ship sculpture is nearly identical in form to the model ship carried during the festival (Posen and Ward, 1985: 151–157). Rodia actually told one of his neighbors that he got his ideas for the towers from things he saw in Italy when he was young, a detail that most writings on Rodia seemed to have neglected completely.[9]

Towers and boat constructed in honor of St. Paulinus at the *Festa dei Gigli* in Nola, Italy. Photograph Adam Eastland.

Another unnoticed influence on Rodia's environment may be the Grotto of the Blessed Virgin at the Holy Ghost Park in Dickeyville, Wisconsin, built under the direction of Father Mathias Wernerus between 1920 and 1930. In a 1953 interview, Rodia said that he worked on the construction of the Dickeyville Grotto, and when asked about a postcard of the Grotto displayed on his living room wall, he said simply, "Jobs I did in Wisconsin. Was a Catholic, but not now. To tell you the truth I don't believe in no religion" (quoted in Morgan, 1984: 80–81).[10] He apparently complained that Father Wernerus never paid him for his work on the Grotto; Wernerus told him that he was a laborer "working for God." Years later, Rodia, still angry at the priest who exploited him, wished he had "taken an axe and chopped that priest" (Ward, 1990: 169). Rodia's work on the Dickeyville Grotto has not been verified. Discrepancies in dates exist and Rodia's numerous wanderings and whereabouts are unclear, but his expressed anger at Father Wernerus suggests some interaction. Rodia's use of inlay and cast-off materials is similar to that of the Grotto (shells, broken glass, tiles, pottery, stones, crockery), and the Grotto was also constructed from shaped steel, covered with wire and concrete, and then covered with inlayed items. During his extensive travels and itinerant construction work, Rodia may have been exposed to other grottos, such as the Grotto of the Redemption in West Bend, Iowa, built between 1912 and 1954. It seems likely that he was at least familiar with general styles of grotto and mosaic construction, which were also prominent in the Campania region of Italy from which he came.

Of equal importance, Rodia's own construction and aesthetic techniques developed over the years from his experience as a cement mason, construction worker, and tile setter. He applied his skills and competency in these areas, expanding this knowledge and exploring and testing different materials, techniques, and architectural forms in the humble yet equally bold style of a true bricoleur. As he experimented daily with new ideas and materials, he sometimes tore down previous structures because of aesthetic or construction issues. As a relatively poor but resourceful man, he used the materials at hand, out of necessity, and like other builders he sometimes struggled with the challenges of construction and the process of creation. "A

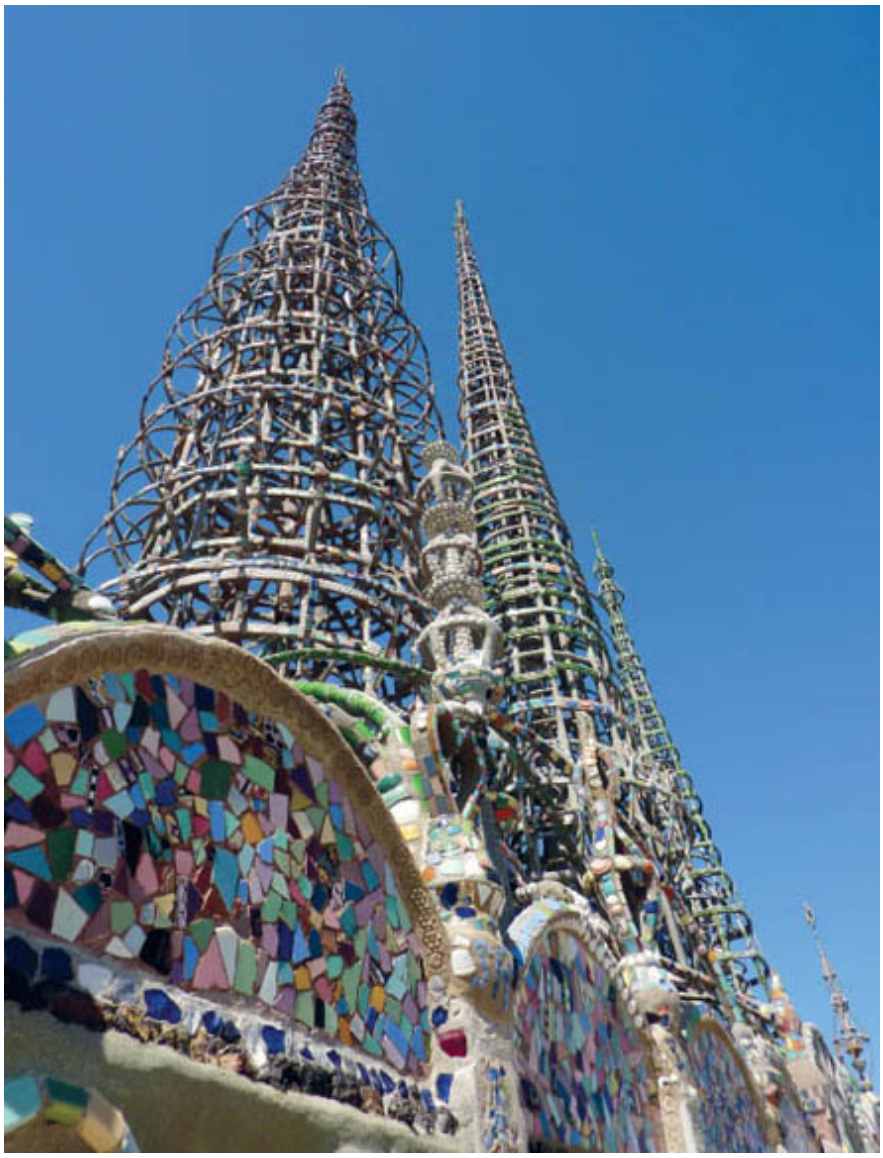
million times, I don't know what to do. . . . I would wake up all night, because this was all my own idea" (in the film by Hale, 1953).

The underlying motivations for Rodia's grand idea were never completely revealed. In fact, Rodia seemed to enjoy toying with reporters and curious onlookers when they asked him why he built his structures, to enjoy contributing to the conflicting narratives and ongoing folklore about himself. He gave various reasons, informing one journalist that his tallest tower was built over the burial spot of his wife, and telling other reporters that he built the towers because he lost his job, or in honor of the highways of California, or because "This is a great country" (Goldstone and Goldstone, 1997: 36, 37). In another interview, he said, "Why I build it? I can't tell you. Why a man make the pants? Why a man make the shoes?" (in the film by Landler and Byer, 2006). Of the various reasons and non-reasons he gave, Rodia's most consistent explanation was that building things helped him overcome his drinking problem. In one of the first interviews with him, in the late 1930s, Rodia recalled building a concrete wall around his property and decorating it with tile. He found the creative process so enjoyable that it actually replaced his drinking habit and gave him a meaningful purpose in his life: "Twenty years ago, I am all the time *borracho*—what you say dronk. My head, she is all time big like—like lard can! She is big so she will hold the great aching from my drink. Then, one day . . . I build my wall so much I am forget to drink. Then I am think of towers and not to drink" (quoted in Seewerker and Owens, 1940: 56). In another early interview, Rodia similarly explained: "I started building a fence round my place with tile. I find that's lots of fun; and I build the fence so much, I forget to drink. I no kid you, honest" (quoted in Goldstone and Goldstone, 1997: 39, 41). In other interviews, he made further claims, saying that after his earlier struggles and "bad" past, he wanted to make amends and do something memorable with his life, referring to himself as "one of the bad men in the United States. I was drunken, all the time a-drinkin'. . . . That's why I built the tower for, I quit the drinkin'" (in the film by Landler and Byer, 2006). As Rodia engaged with the creative process, building things became an act of self-therapy and meaning, and he transformed himself from an alcoholic to an artist. In giving structure to the chaos of salvaged found objects, he gradually rebuilt himself as well in an attempt to transcend the wreckage of his past. The therapeutic aspects of creativity are multifaceted and intertwined; in Rodia's case, the ideational challenge of the artistic process

may have been therapeutic in itself. The experimentation with ideas, the intellectual satisfaction of problem-solving, and the creation of order in aesthetically pleasing ways can aid in the clarification and reconstruction of identity, and contribute to a sense of self worth. The tactile and sensory pleasures of creative practice may be therapeutic as well, serving to distract one from pain, redirecting emotional energies, or providing a way to externalize inner feelings that perhaps are difficult to verbalize. While Rodia's extraordinary artistic achievement had clear therapeutic functions, his towers also illuminate the subtle and often ignored cultural influences upon the work of so-called outsiders, demonstrating the interplay between individual creativity and cultural contexts. Finally, Rodia's project exemplifies the complexities of unraveling artistic motivation, as his reasons for creating his structures varied over time, with his towers embodying a range of meanings throughout the thirty-three years that he constructed them.

Sabato Rodia's towers, view looking up from inside the base. Photograph 2011, Daniel Wojcik.

At the time that Rodia undertook his effort to construct the towers, he had experienced three failed marriages and had abandoned his family; he had suffered the tragic deaths of his baby daughter and brother; and by most accounts he was a difficult man with alcoholic and anarchistic tendencies. He was a working class, blue-collar laborer who spoke little English and had difficulties communicating with people. Rodia never really assimilated into American culture; throughout his life, he was upset with American politicians, the government, the Catholic Church, and the mistreatment of immigrants and the poor. On occasion, he said he wanted to work for peace in the world, and he refused to listen to a radio his niece gave him because the endless reports of violence and cruelty were too troubling. Instead, he chose to listen to opera and classical music on his aged horn phonograph. At the same time, he embraced Old World views rooted in Southern Italian peasant culture and yearned for an idealized past: he complained about the loss of traditions, the decline of the modern world, women wearing too much make-up, and the breakdown of the family (Posen and Ward, 1985: 153–157; Trillin, 1974). He regularly expressed pride in his Italian heritage and the accomplishments of the ancient Romans and great Italian inventors and builders, including architectural feats such as the Leaning Tower of Pisa, which he mistakenly attributed to Galileo, announcing at one point, "'My God,' I say, 'I'm gonna make a tower, different than Galileo.'" He spoke of Guglielmo Marconi's inventions, and referred to his towers as new inventions as well, explaining, "That's an invention. You see lots of towers. That's a new style tower" (quoted in Trillin, 1965: 115). Rodia also admired Italian explorers such as Marco Polo, Amerigo Vespucci, and Christopher Columbus, and is said to have referred to his three main towers as the Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria after Columbus's fleet. In fact, his overall site resembles a ship with towering masts, since the walls surrounding the site come to a point and form a bow (Landler and Byer, 2006).



Sabato Rodia’s towers and mosaic work on south exterior wall. Photograph 2011, Daniel Wojcik.

Leonard Knight and his painted truck and environment at Salvation Mountain, Niland, California, 1990s. Photograph Ted Degener.

Considering the towers within context of Rodia's attitudes and life experiences, it is apparent that he created them in part as an expression of his Italian heritage, and in remembrance of or nostalgia for Italian traditions. Whether related to *giglio* traditions or not, his structures clearly recall the bell towers, Gothic cathedrals, and mosaic craftwork of Italy and proclaim a sense of his own self-worth and creativity in the tradition of Italian artistic accomplishments. His towers express a broader Italian-American immigrant experience, including feelings of dislocation, an aspiration to achieve the American Dream, and a personal attempt to negotiate recollections of Italian heritage with hopes of success and recognition in the United States. Because the United States had been good to him, Rodia had made a promise to himself to reciprocate and express his gratitude, telling one reporter, "Before I die I'm going to do something for the US."[11] Rodia's desire to be connected to a broader community and his hope that his work might be regarded as a communal gift are revealed by the title he gave his structures:

Nuestro Pueblo, which can be translated from the Spanish as "Our Town," "Our People," or "Our Community."

Rodia was an enigmatic man, but his statements indicate he built the towers initially as a therapeutic, redemptive act of self-healing and in atonement for his alcoholism, his personal failures, and the dishonor of his past. He embraced the artistic process as a means to proclaim his individuality and distinguish himself in a society in which he felt displaced, a way to transcend the errors and anonymity of his life. As he put it, "A man has to be good good or bad bad to be remembered" (quoted in Trillin, 1965: 78). The towers magnificently display his ingenuity and a mastery of technique, demonstrated on a colossal scale, a vernacular version of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Out of the discarded objects and recycled materials he salvaged, Rodia constructed a monument with his skills and imagination, building something never seen before and thus leaving his mark on the world. "I had in mind to do something big and I did," he once stated (quoted in Trillin, 1974: 21). Although the towers embody deeply personal meanings infused with cultural memory, Rodia also constructed them for a broader community. Like other environment builders, his structures were openly public displays and visual forms of communication intended to engage others and evoke responses.

As the artistic achievements of Rodia and those of other vernacular creators illustrate, the reasons for constructing such environmental assemblages are complex and variable, personal and cultural. Visionary experiences and religious ideas often appear to motivate individuals, as in the case of Finster's Paradise Garden, Wernerus's Holy Ghost Park, or the Salvation Mountain created by Leonard Knight (1931–2014) near Niland, California. In some cases, such environments express individualistic and unorthodox spiritual beliefs, such as Robert Tatin's (1902–1983) temple to esoteric spirituality in Cossé-le-Vivien, France, or Eddie Owens Martin's (known as St. EOM, 1908–1986), Land of Pasaquan, a monument to his own eclectic personal faith, in Buena Vista, Georgia. However, a number of environments, particularly in the United States, communicate patriotic ideas or include social and political critiques. For instance, Samuel Perry Dinsmoor's (1843–1932) Garden of Eden, in Lucas, Kansas, expresses populist views about exploitation of the working man and the "Crucifixion of Labor" by government, religion, the banking system, and corporate trusts. Numerous African American art environments contain social commentary,

such as the African American Heritage Museum and Black Veteran's Archive constructed in Aurora, Illinois by Charles Smith (born 1940). Motivated in part by ongoing war trauma and the death of his best friend while they were together in Vietnam, Smith's environment addresses racism and oppression while also commemorating the thousands of African Americans who died in the Vietnam War. Other environments express particular preoccupations, such as Jeff McKissack's (1902–1980) Orange Show in Houston, Texas, a monument to the nutrients and health-giving properties of the orange. As individualistic as such environments may appear, they are necessarily rooted in social and cultural contexts, and sometimes are explicitly created to celebrate local culture, such as the Wisconsin Concrete Park built by Fred Smith (1886–1976) in Phillips, Wisconsin, that contains more than two hundred embellished sculptures commemorating local history as well as national heroes and icons.

The Rock Garden of Nek Chand

Nek Chand's Rock Garden in Chandigarh, Northern India, the world's largest vernacular art environment, exemplifies the ways an intensely private and seemingly idiosyncratic vision is rooted in traditions and connected to local culture. Like Rodia, Chand (born Nek Chand Saini, 1924–2015) built on a monumental scale. As a consummate bricoleur and master of the creative recycling of discarded objects, he built a massive manifestation of a dream, containing thousands of statues made from cement and inlaid with recycled urban debris, including pottery shards, glass bangles, wire, bicycle parts, light bulbs, plastic, and even human hair. Now encompassing an estimated twenty-five acres, Chand's garden is populated with sculptures of gods, goddess, kings, queens, animals, and villagers engaged in everyday activities. It is an alternative realm comprised of an elaborate system of walkways, fountains, mosaic courtyards, passageways, bridges, streams, and waterfalls. Started as a clandestine personal project, the Rock Garden has become the second largest tourist attraction in India next to the Taj Mahal, with thousands of visitors daily and more than twelve million visitors since 1976. Although now accepted as an expression of aspects of Indian culture, Chand's garden still continues to be categorized as an outsider-art phenomenon, a strange creation perhaps built by "some crackpot . . . touched

with madness," and those who have studied Chand's environment repeatedly have had to assert that he is not mad or schizophrenic.[12] His environment may appear entirely idiosyncratic, an expression of individual imagination, skill, and resourcefulness, but it also expresses cultural traditions and broader societal contexts.

Nek Chand's Rock Garden with a landscape of Queen figures clothed in broken glass bangles, Chandigarh, India. Photograph 1993, Ted Degener.

Nek Chand's Rock Garden, human figures, concrete embedded with ceramic shards and stones, Chandigarh, India. Courtesy Nek Chand Foundation, UK.

Chand began his project in secret, building it illegally at night on government-owned land that he appropriated on the outskirts of town. Like Cheval, he was fascinated by the shapes of rocks as sculptures created by nature, and he had dreamt of building an environment someday devoted to nature and the world's religions. When he began conceptualizing his project, Chand was employed as a roads inspector for the government. In 1958 he began collecting the unusual and interesting stones that attracted his attention, often those with biomorphic shapes. He realized that these stones were filled with a living spirit: "All the stones have a soul. They are alive. I brought them here by myself, one by one, on my bike. The stones are like gods and goddesses: there is life in them. Whenever I look at them or pass them, they touch my heart. When we look at them, they look at us too" (in the film by Lespinasse, 2002). Animistic beliefs about souls or divine presences that infuse nature and the physical world are common within some forms of Hinduism. In these traditions, mountains, trees, the moon, waterfalls, animals, pebbles, and other things may have a unique spirit and

represent a divinity. Inspired by the divine essence in these stones, Chand began collecting thousands of rocks from nearby riverbeds and the Himalayan foothills, transporting them by bicycle to an isolated section of government land near the city dump. He started to clear the thick brush in this section of the forest, which was part of a designated forest buffer zone around the city where building of any kind was forbidden. As an employee for the public works department, Chand was obviously aware of the fact that he would lose his job and face imprisonment if caught, but he pursued his vision and created a small garden area in this secluded, mosquito- and snake-infested area, sometimes covering himself in burlap bags as he worked to protect against the clouds of biting insects. At some point Chand began gathering items from the nearby dump and from demolition sites, salvaging through the wreckage and rubble from more than twenty local villages around Chandigarh that had been demolished in an effort to rebuild and modernize the city.

After the 1947 partition of colonial India that resulted in the creation of the nations of India and Pakistan, the city of Chandigarh was designated the new capital of Indian Punjab. The Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier (1887–1965) was enlisted to redesign it in a contemporary style as the first planned city in India, an architectural statement of a new and modern India. Le Corbusier's highly ordered and grid-like plan, with its emphasis on minimalist perfection and concrete structures, was in stark contrast to the previous indigenous mixtures of vernacular building styles that were spread throughout the city, and which now lay in ruins, bulldozed to make way for the new city plan. As S. S. Bhatti describes it, "Chandigarh was conceived amid and shaped out of the trauma, confusion, and crisis accompanying the political partition of colonial India into the independent nations of India and Pakistan. . . . In spite of its clinical tidiness, as compared to the squalor of old Indian towns, its citizens feel that Chandigarh is a city without a soul" (1997: 18). Government officials issued an edict that implicitly condemned the individualistic and folk architectural traditions of the past, with a new mandate to educate "the present and future citizens of Chandigarh about the basic concepts of planning the city so that they become its guardians and save it from the whims of individuals" (quoted in Umberger, 2007: 320). Decades later, the discovery of Chand's secret Rock Garden offered the city's inhabitants an alternative architectural experience, one that was in complete violation the city edict, a singular creation based on the whim of an

individual and built illegally on government property, but suffused with the soul of the local, reflective of vernacular traditions, and constructed from the remnants of village life.

During the preparation stage of his project, Chand gathered rocks and rubble for seven years and in 1965, after amassing and organizing tons of materials, he began to build what he called the Kingdom of Gods and Goddesses. He often worked under the cover of darkness, as he had from the inception of his vision, building his sculptures in the flickering light of the salvaged bicycle and automobile tires that he set on fire nearby for illumination. The construction of this first phase of his garden was based on a dream he had as a child, of a lost kingdom of harmony and perfection that had been destroyed, a vision perhaps inspired by the folk narratives and mythological tales told to him by his mother. According to Bhatti, an authority on Indian art and architecture, the concept of the Rock Garden is rooted in the Indian myth of the "immortal king," who commands his kingdom "free from fear, jealousy, and war. All the denizens of this kingdom, whether they are human beings, birds, or animals, have been endowed with immortality as a fruit of good deeds they had done in their mortal life" (1989: 22). Chand views his creation of this lost Kingdom as a restoration of a perfect place of peace and eternal life populated by the immortal beings of an otherworldly realm, and as an expression of his beliefs about the acceptance of the world's religions. As he explained, "The garden preaches the lessons of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence, the very fabric of Hindu religion. To stay as the largest democratic secular nation, we must profess and follow tolerance toward others" (quoted in Beardsley, 1995: 62–63).

Chand's family was forced to abandon their home during the partition in 1947, and his life was profoundly affected by the experience of religious conflict and intolerance. Under the new borders of the partition, the village where Chand grew up was suddenly located within the Islamic state of Pakistan, and being Hindu, his family fled by foot into India, leaving all their possessions behind. The partition resulted in massive cross-border migrations, disrupting the lives of more than twelve million Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, in what was the largest displacement of people in history. Entire villages were destroyed in the upheaval, and nearly one million people died during this mass exodus (Umberger, 2007: 319; Peiry, 2006: 11). As Chand recalled, "At Partition, people committed suicide,

mutilated themselves. We were no longer permitted to stay where we were and were forced to leave; if not, we would have been massacred" (quoted in Peiry, 2006: 11–12). As it was for millions of others, the harrowing experience of dislocation was a traumatic one for Chand. He and his family had become refugees overnight, losing their home and possessions, and the death of both of his parents soon after the twenty-four day trek to India further increased his sense of exile and loss. He blamed their deaths on the traumatic forced exodus, and the loss haunted him throughout his life. Some of Chand's early constructions were an attempt to recuperate his lost home and recover the past, as he recreated a miniature version of the village of his birth. By reconstructing his village, as part of a vanished kingdom of harmony and peace, Chand endeavored to rebuild the severed links to his ancestral home and symbolically reconnect to a community that was gone forever.

When Chand first began his project, he said that he considered it a hobby, much like Rodia viewed his initial mosaic work with found objects. In Rodia's case, his hobby inadvertently led to the discovery that the process of building things had therapeutic effects, helping him overcome his alcoholism. Chand's meticulous and spiritual assemblage of stones similarly may have had a therapeutic function, related to his experiences of displacement and loss, as art historian and curator Leslie Umberger suggests. "The stones empowered him, charging him with their well-being. Collecting them, as if rescuing individual souls, became an act of healing for Nek Chand, bringing together spiritual fragments that, bit by bit, started to shape a new life from a broken past" (Umberger, 2007: 321). Out of necessity, Chand built his project on an inhospitable plot of dense scrub land, working in unpleasant conditions, yet the difficulty of his task did not appear to bother him in the least, as if the ordeal itself were a necessary part of the process of personal renewal. For years he completely immersed himself in the act of collecting discards, arranging them in an ordered manner, and refiguring and assembling the pieces in a holistic way to create a kingdom, transforming a desolate area into something divine. Working in solitude, he was not building his garden for an audience or for personal recognition. He did not think of the process as an artistic endeavor: "I regarded myself as neither an artist nor a craftsman. I myself was completely insignificant. I had no idea about anything, except for the fact that I was devoting my time to a

task that I was passionate about. I worked to the limits of my strength" (quoted in Peiry, 2006: 15).

Nek Chand with the tree sculptures that he created in his Rock Garden. Photograph 1993, Ted Degener.

While Chand may have been rebuilding himself emotionally through his reconstruction of a lost kingdom, he says that his motivation was primarily a spiritual one, for he considers his project to be a sacred space that honors God in all manifestations: "All the gods of the world are my gods. . . . I wanted to build a holy place where the universal meaning of all gods, Jehovah and Christ, Buddha and Lord Krishna, is respected" (quoted in Schiff, 1984: 127). The Punjab region of India where the garden is located has a history of religious violence; Chand's inclusive view of world religions and creation of a place devoted to personal spirituality free from dogma and religious conflict is especially significant, related in part to Chand's own

experiences of religious strife and bloodshed. His open-air shrine to the diversity of religious belief reflects the tenant within Hindu tradition that there is no single definition of God, but innumerable manifestations of the divine, and that individuals have the freedom to worship God in whatever form they desire. The Rock Garden also expresses Chand's belief in the ultimate goodness of the universe and the divine potential in its physical manifestations, the idea of cyclical regeneration and the perfectibility of human beings, where the human soul gradually progresses toward perfection through subsequent reincarnations if one follows the principles of ethical and righteous living (*dharma*). The use of debris and recycled materials reflects the spiritual respect for the value of all things and the potential to attain a higher purpose. Like the journey of human beings toward the divine, discarded objects and trash may be transformed and reincarnated into new forms, and thus achieve an elevated state of perfection. Chand says his use of recycling also is modeled after his observations of the cyclical processes of nature itself, which never wastes anything—as the fallen leaves and decaying flowers return to the soil, they give life to new forms in the spring, in a natural and cosmic cycle of rebirth and regeneration (Bhatti, 1989: 25). The entire process of creating his Rock Garden project has become an act of spiritual devotion and perhaps a form of healing for Chand. "Over the years my work has become like a meditation. It makes me feel close to God. I become completely absorbed in it. . . . Everything else is forgotten when I am at work" (quoted in Reeve, 1994: 41).

Engrossed in his project as sacred practice, Chand continued to develop it, working every day after work for at least four hours into the night and whenever else he had spare time, with only his wife and a few others aware of his construction. By the time it was discovered by a government crew in 1972, his project had expanded from a walled garden area with a few sculptures to a twelve acre Rock Garden kingdom. The response to the discovery of the garden by local officials was mixed—officially, Chand's construction was built illegally in an area where no development was allowed, and some government officials demanded its destruction. Others appreciated what Chand had accomplished, regarding it as a grassroots reflection of the local culture that had been demolished by Le Corbusier's rigid and homogenous cityscape. Once the citizens of Chandigarh learned of the garden, local support swelled. People flocked to the spot and soon began bringing materials for its further development. Swayed by community

enthusiasm, authorities acknowledged the popular appeal and worth of the Rock Garden, ruling that the environment should be sustained. Chand was given a modest salary and a workforce of laborers to help him build his construction, which was opened to the public in 1976. With government support, Chand's environment quickly expanded in several phases, and he dramatically transformed the landscape, adding larger structures, passageways, buildings, arches, palaces, plazas, waterfalls, a theater, and hundreds of colorfully decorated figurative statues, some of which are engaged in everyday activities while others stand attentively in rows.

Site view of Nek Chand's Rock Garden, with animal figures in the foreground. Courtesy Nek Chand Foundation, UK.

Even as the Rock Garden grew, official views of the environment were conflicted, with authorities withdrawing support or threatening to demolish sections, such as in 1990, when a bulldozer was sent by hostile authorities to cut a path through the garden in order to build a road. More than one thousand community members mobilized, with some protesters lying down in front of the bulldozer and creating a human shield to protect the garden;

after extended legal battles, the planned highway route was overruled. Ongoing hostilities persisted among some bureaucrats, who still resented the illegal construction activities of Chand and the fact that a rural peasant from a lower caste was now receiving international recognition. In 1996, the day after Chand left the country for a two-month lecture tour, the government suddenly withdrew its support and left the gardens unguarded; a large number of sculptures were damaged in an attack of systematic vandalism (Reeve, 1994: 41–42). In response, a massive letter writing campaign ensued and those concerned about the future of the Rock Garden formed the Nek Chand Foundation, a charity to preserve the environment, much like the organization that was created in an attempt to protect Rodia's towers.

Chand's environment now has gained supporters throughout the world and it has survived because of its popularity among the citizens of Chandigarh, who have rallied to save it more than once, and who have embraced its homegrown style and cultural meanings. Like other environment builders such as Rodia, Hampton, and Finster, it is Chand's creative innovation upon traditions that attracts, his resourceful reworking of the familiar that fascinates and that accounts for much of the appeal of his environment. While the Rock Garden is a reflection of Chand's religious views and sense of aesthetics, it is rooted in local traditions of construction and style, such as Mughal architecture and the layout of a traditional Punjab village, with transitions from narrow lanes to wide squares, and structures that grow organically out of the landscape. As Bhatti notes, Chand exhibits "the skills and values of a long folk tradition but also extends them through new encounters, experiences, attitudes, and aspirations. Thus, while his materials are by and large urban and industrial waste, Nek Chand's ideas and methods are predominantly rural in origin and character" (1989: 25). This synthesis of folk aesthetics and recycled discards resembles the techniques of the squatters in Chandigarh, mostly migrants from the villages, who have similarly created dwellings and shops in an improvised way from salvaged industrial debris. The Rock Garden not only reflects these traditions of folk recycling, but its existence has initiated a larger recycling program to rid Chandigarh of its mounds of industrial trash. With help from the government, Chand has set up local collection centers around the city, where broken ceramics, rags, and other refuse are collected for reuse in the garden. This network of waste collection centers has developed over the years to become one of the largest recycling programs in Asia, with factories, hotels,

hospitals, restaurants, and stores participating in the effort while providing the raw materials for the continued construction of the Rock Garden (Reeve, 1994: 37).

Figure covered with glass bangles, Nek Chand's Rock Garden. Photograph 1993, Ted Degener.

Figures covered in glass bangles from Phase 2 of Nek Chand's Rock Garden, 1976–1978. Courtesy Nek Chand Foundation, UK.

Site view of animal and human figures, Nek Chand's Rock Garden. Courtesy Nek Chand Foundation, UK.

Started as a secretive endeavor for himself and the gods alone, initially as an act of self-healing from the trauma of forced displacement and loss, Chand's garden has developed into an expression of community and a public resource, a place where weddings and concerts are held and families now spend their weekends. Unlike the towers built by Sabato Rodia, whose aesthetics of creative recycling and techniques of bricolage were foreign to the sensibilities of his community, Chand's project is understood within the framework of vernacular knowledge. Community members now actively contribute to the construction process. In opposition to the alienating and institutionally imposed architecture by Le Corbusier, Chand's home-born environment expresses the soul of the city, embraced by the community and millions of people throughout India alike as a place that offers meaningful aesthetic and spiritual experiences rooted in local traditions and broader cultural values. Transforming industrial trash into a transcendent realm, Chand's seemingly outsider activities illustrate how the creative "whims of

individuals" are imbued with cultural resonance that may have restorative and transformative effects for a broader community.

Tyree Guyton and the Heidelberg Project

Of the art environments that have emerged from traumatic experiences and that have generated the promise of community transformation, Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project in Detroit has been one of most controversial. Like Chand's Rock Garden, sections of Guyton's project were built illegally on property that he does not own, and his appropriation of abandoned homes and vacant lots has provoked hostile responses from government authorities who have ordered the destruction of his constructions on several occasions. Guyton (born 1955) began building his project in a run-down part of Detroit's lower east side, on Heidelberg Street, where he lived. It has overtaken two blocks of his largely abandoned neighborhood, a massive, in-your-face display of recycled junk and discarded objects that he collected, reworked, and exhibited on his street. On dilapidated houses he painted polka dots and covered the structures with baby dolls, old appliances, furniture, and clothes; he hung old bicycles upside down from trees, all painted in bright colors and adorned with broken objects; and he piled and arranged configurations of tires, shoes, automobile parts, and vacuum cleaners on vacant lots and yards. Turning onto Heidelberg Street and entering Guyton's environment, one is confronted by an explosion of debris, as if the houses have been turned inside out and are spewing forth the commodities and junk of everyday life, a disorienting display that is simultaneously shocking, wondrous, and disturbing.

Guyton created these assemblages as a form of social commentary and as a method to draw attention to the decline of his community. Over the years his constructions have addressed issues such as racism, poverty, homelessness, inner-city violence, war, politics, the mass media, and social injustice in general. Like other environment builders who recycle junk and discards, Guyton has been called crazy, and his project has been condemned as a collection of garbage, an eyesore, and a health hazard (Darrach and Leonhauser, 1988; Hodges, 2011).[13] His yard art installations have not only antagonized city officials, but also angered some of his neighbors who are offended by what they regard as piles of trash that degrade the

neighborhood, bring unwanted attention, reflect poorly on the local African American community, and are fire hazards. Parts of Guyton's environment have been bulldozed and demolished on orders by city authorities, while other constructions have been burnt to the ground under suspicious circumstances. Despite the destruction of some of his installations and ongoing struggles over the years, his work has evolved into an internationally known art environment, described as a "Ghetto Guggenheim," which is now part of the identity of Detroit and has been said to attract over 275,000 visitors a year (Alvin, 2006; Whitfield, 2000: 191).

Street view of Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project, Detroit, 1997. Photograph Daniel Wojcik.

One of Tyree Guyton's Polka Dot Houses (the "New White House," formerly the "Dotty Wotty House"), Heidelberg Project, Detroit, c. 2010. Photograph Ron Gasowski. Courtesy SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments.

Tyree Guyton's "Fun House," created in the mid-1980s and demolished in 1991, Heidelberg Project. Photograph 1990, Ted Degener.

Guyton began his project in 1986 in Detroit's McDougall-Hunt neighborhood, a part of the city that looked like the ruins of a town that had been bombed and abandoned, with boarded-up and ramshackle houses, vacant lots overgrown with weeds, gutted automobiles, and the remnants of structures burnt to the ground. This was the neighborhood where Guyton grew up as a child, in a house on the 3600 block of Heidelberg Street, his family struggling to survive on welfare, sometimes without food or electricity (Noriyuki, 1995: E6). His mother raised the family by herself. As he described it to me in an interview in 2006, "I grew up poor, I came from a big family, there were ten kids in my family. I was on my own, I never had shoes, I wore used ones. I grew up a loner. I played alone, did my own thing."[14] Living in a six-bedroom house with twenty other people, he was a neglected child, one of many whose toys were discarded things, and at an early age he began salvaging found objects out of necessity. "I would take a pair of old shoes and put paper in them or cardboard in them. They were real big and people thought it was funny. We just didn't have, but I took what we

had and made it work" (quoted in Noriyuki, 1989: 16). Cast-off things were used in creative ways. Guyton remembers playing with hubcaps, scraps of metal, old dolls, and anything else he could find. These experiences inform his assemblages today, which often are constructed from the objects he yearned for as a child. "We didn't have a phone, we didn't have toys to play with. So a lot of the stuff that I relate to is . . . stuff I didn't have, stuff that I wanted" (quoted in Plagens, 1990: 64).

Guyton's art has had a cathartic function, helping him confront the cruelty and pain he experienced as a child—the sexual abuse late at night by a strange man who visited his mother; the brutality of his aunt who shut him in a dark closet for hours, stuck him with safety pins, and told him that he was worthless and crazy; the poverty, the violence, the rats, and the darkness in a house with the shades always drawn (Noriyuki, 1989: 12). He says his early work was driven by an attempt to "stop the darkness," and many of his first sculptures are coated with thick black paint or are colored bright red, symbolic of the pain and anguish that engulfed him as a child. Creating things became a form of spiritual cleansing and a way for him to express emotions about traumatic childhood experiences. "I've seen a lot of dark moments. I've seen a lot of hurt. . . . I found myself at a point where I wanted to talk about that. I wanted to find out where did it stop, how did you make it stop. . . . How do you stop the darkness?" (quoted in Noriyuki, 1989: 21).

The therapeutic aspects of Guyton's early work have been described by Duane Noriyuki, a journalist for the *Detroit Free Press* and one of the first to write about the Heidelberg Project, who recalls that Guyton's art grew out of a "desperate attempt to heal. I remember going into the dark basement during my first interview and listening to him describe his horrific childhood as an explanation of his art. The basement was dark, and we listened to Coltrane. Many of his smaller pieces were painted black. Art created Tyree as much as he created art, but perhaps that's the case with all artists. . . . Now, he has become iconic, representing the depth of darkness many Detroit children feel."[15] The cast-off objects Guyton salvaged for his projects mirrored his own childhood feelings of being discarded and worthless, and through the aesthetic recycling of found objects he found his own artistic voice. Guyton began to see beauty and life in the discarded junk, and in translating his own experiences of abandonment and abuse into his art, he transformed worthless things into something of meaning and value.

Like Rodia, Chand, and others, he discovered that the process of creatively reconfiguring recycled objects contributed to a reconstruction and reaffirmation of the self in response to the shattering effects of life trauma.

Guyton's project has not only helped him address the difficulties of his childhood, but is also directly related to the trauma that Detroit as a community experienced during the riots in 1967 and the subsequent decline of the city, the collapse of neighborhoods, the segregation, the abandoned structures, the poverty, crime, murder, inequality, neglect, and despair. In July 1967, at the age of twelve, Guyton witnessed the riots and watched as parts of the city burned. As he described it, "The whole city was on fire, and I thought the world was ending. . . . That changed me, and it changed Detroit, forever."[16] After five days of violence and civil unrest in one of the most destructive riots in American history, more than two thousand buildings had been looted and destroyed. A mass exodus from the inner city ensued, communities that were once racially integrated became segregated urban ghettos, and many people abandoned the city completely. In Guyton's view, city officials abandoned parts of Detroit as well.

The depopulation of the inner city of Detroit is staggering. More than a million people have moved away over the past four decades. The population dropped from a peak of 1.8 million inhabitants in 1950s to 713,777 in 2010, and continues to decrease, the result of urban flight to the suburbs, the gasoline crises of the 1970s, and the decline of the American automobile industry (Seelye, 2011). In his book *AfterCulture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History*, Jerry Herron, a native Detroiter and scholar of American literature and culture, comments on the tragic decline of the city: "Detroit, [the] one place that everybody else can agree on by agreeing they no longer want any part of it. Not when they think about what has gone on, and gone wrong, here: riots and white flight, plant closings and industrial collapse, murders and carjackings, assaults, arson, and drug wars. . . . Neighborhoods collapsed . . . because half the goddam population left" (1993: 13–14). Guyton's neighborhood around Heidelberg Street was one of those that disintegrated in the aftermath of the riots. It quickly became a semi-abandoned ghetto in which poverty, crime, hopelessness, and drug dealing were the rule. In describing the decline of his neighborhood, Guyton has said it looked like "a bomb went off" (in the film by Cattell, 1998). According to census figures, the mortality rate for young African American males in the neighborhood is now 55 percent, the unemployment rate is 75

percent with more than 90 percent of those in the community below the poverty line, and it is predicted that if the neighborhood continues to decline at its current rate there will be nothing but vacant lots in the near future.[17]

Prior to beginning his project, Guyton had worked as a firefighter, was employed as an autoworker, and served in the army. He had been creating his small assemblages in the basement of his grandfather Sam Mackey's house, confronting the personal demons that haunted him. In 1986, at the age of thirty-one, as Guyton struggled with despair, it occurred to him that the public display of art on his street might be a possible solution to a desperate situation. During a home improvement project, he wiped his paint brush on the street and realized how a streak of color could brighten up the drab environment. Soon after, as he tells it, the neglect and dereliction of his neighborhood literally began speaking to him. "When I started this Heidelberg Project, it was like the house next door was talking. Then the house across the street was talking. Then the crack house started to talk. . . . Then I just got carried away and found myself running from this house to that house. . . . You're not going to believe this. The street said to paint it, so I blocked off the street and starting painting" (quoted in Noriyuki, 1989: 18). One of the first things he painted was a polka dot, as a circle of life, representing the sun, moon, and universe; and then with help from his wife Karen, Grandpa Mackey, and neighborhood children, he began building sculptures in vacant lots, painting abandoned buildings, and covering them with toys, household appliances, car parts, shoes, dismembered dolls, signs, crosses, suitcases, stuffed animals, broken television sets, and other cast-off things.[18]

The assemblages were created not only as a way to liven up the street but also to attract attention to the decaying neighborhood and the abandoned buildings, some of which were being used by crack cocaine dealers and prostitutes.[19] With Grandpa Mackey and Karen, he covered one crack house, for example, with colorful polka dots, put a big baby doll and blue inner tube on the roof, and a doghouse on the porch. Because of the attention the house received from the media and local Detroiters, the drug dealers began leaving the area (Darrach and Leonhauser, 1988: 60; Alvin, 2006). Guyton's assemblages and appropriation of local structures had effectively created a neighborhood watch program, and some supportive neighbors became involved in the project over time. Sometimes he listened to John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk as he worked; Guyton's project might be seen as an

improvisational, visual riff on the art of jazz, and his lyrical or jarring compositions of discarded junk eventually attracted an audience and community participation. As Guyton remembers it, “It really gave the neighbors something to do. They saw me getting out and cutting the grass in these vacant lots, and all of a sudden, they’re coming to me with their cast-off old toys, car parts, whatever, and wanting me to incorporate them into my work. The people started sweeping up, then they started fixing up and painting, and all of a sudden people are having fun; they’re sitting out on the front porch again and saying this neighborhood has turned—from bad to good” (quoted in “Creator of Post-Industrial Art,” 1989).[20]

Although Guyton’s efforts to transform his neighborhood were acknowledged by some, and he and Karen received a “Spirit of Detroit Award” in 1989, his project still generated hostility from a number of city council and community members who regarded his environment as a trash heap and blight on the neighborhood, a freak attraction for tourists and white suburbanites who cruised the street with locked car doors and who would never tolerate such a project in their own neighborhoods. Guyton had appropriated public property for much of his project, and although this was abandoned property, his actions were technically illegal. In response to neighborhood complaints, city officials ordered that some of his structures be destroyed or disassembled. In August 1989, without warning, the city demolished the Baby Doll House, an abandoned building formerly used by prostitutes until Guyton covered with it an unsettling display of broken, disfigured, and sometimes naked dolls and mannequins—hanging out of windows, perched precariously on the roof, crucified with nails through outstretched arms, dismembered and sometimes in lewd positions. “If the house had a voice it would have wept and squalled, ‘This is what we have done to our children’” (Noriyuki, 1995: E6). According to Guyton, his use of dolls was a commentary on child abuse, the shattered innocence of children, childhood prostitution, and the destruction of the young; and he believes the house was destroyed because of the issues it dealt with and its disturbing imagery.[21] Discarded and disfigured baby dolls appeared prominently in many of Guyton’s early works, obvious references to the neglect and mistreatment of children and his own difficult childhood experiences, and perhaps related to the fact that he was severely punished for playing with dolls as a child.

Tyree Guyton, house with dolls, toys, and other found objects, Heidelberg Project. Photograph 1997, Daniel Wojcik.

Two months after the destruction of the Baby Doll House, a former crack house covered with tires and found objects was also torn down (the "Tire House"). Then early on a Saturday morning in November 1991, again without warning, four houses were demolished by bulldozers sent by the mayor of Detroit, Coleman Young, who said the project was not art (Whitfield, 2000: 190). Young's actions may have been motivated in part by Guyton's recent appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show, which presented him as a nuisance to the neighborhood while also highlighting the blight of Detroit, perhaps embarrassing the mayor in the process. The demolition not only destroyed the houses, but also a large number of artworks that Guyton had been storing for an upcoming show and some of his grandfather's art.

Guyton is certainly not alone among environment builders in having his constructions destroyed, as numerous other works have been condemned and demolished because of their challenges to local sensibilities or violation of city ordinances. For instance, in 1988, Kea Tawana's *Ark*, an eighty-foot long wooden boat built from recycled found objects in the rubble of the Central Ward of Newark, New Jersey, was ruled unsafe by city officials and

condemned for violating building codes; Tawana was ordered to disassemble her boat sculpture. Clarence Schmidt's elaborate *House of Mirrors*, constructed from hundreds of recycled window frames that were fashioned around trees covered in tinsel in Woodstock, New York, was burnt to the ground in 1968, apparently by hostile neighbors. More recently, in 2011, the builder of *Phonehenge West*, Kim Fahey, was cited for not obtaining building permits and violating numerous building codes, and was ordered to destroy the thirteen structures he had constructed from discarded utility poles and other recycled materials over a twenty-year period in the Mojave Desert. Facing a prison sentence, Fahey, a retired phone company technician, had the structures dismantled, but vowed to rebuild them "even better" on a rental property with the proper permits in nearby Tehachapi, California.[22]

Tyree Guyton, in front of his assemblages, with one of his “Faces in the Hood” paintings, Heidelberg Project, 1997. Photograph Daniel Wojcik.

Tyree Guyton's "Party Animal House," Heidelberg Project; destroyed by fire in 2014. Photograph 2007, courtesy of the Heidelberg Project Archive.

In Guyton's case, the destruction of the houses and his other installations on vacant lots in 1991 had a devastating effect. The death the following year of Guyton's mentor and beloved collaborator Grandpa Mackey, who was heartbroken after the demolition, triggered a period of grief and soul-searching. Despondent and angry at the city, Guyton slowly began reconstructing his project. The process of creation again seemed to sustain him through difficult times and tragedies—his divorce from Karen Guyton after nine years of marriage; the loss of three brothers to violence and drugs; financial ruin; and a night spent with a .25 automatic in his hand, wanting to end a lifetime of pain.[23] During this period of struggle, he gradually rebuilt both the project and himself, encouraged by his friends and supporters, particularly Jenenne Whitfield, who was instrumental in the revitalization of the project as its new executive director, and who married Guyton in 2001. Guyton first worked on his own house and then expanded to other abandoned structures, and he painted car hoods and plywood for his "Faces

of God" and "Faces in the Hood" installations. His efforts received some recognition and financial support, yet his ongoing battles with the city continued, and he was cited for littering and creating an illegal dump site. In February of 1999, Detroit mayor Dennis Archer declared the site unsanitary and a haven for rats. He ordered the destruction of three more houses, and about 40 percent of the project was demolished (Hodges, 2011; Whitfield, 2000: 191). This time, as the structures were being demolished, Guyton and his family and friends frantically tried to save some works, as did some of the city workers who had been ordered to disassemble the structures. In the midst of it all, Guyton grabbed a paint bucket and began to paint blue polka dots throughout the environment. When interviewed by reporters about the destruction, he gave them his defiant response: "I'm going to polka dot the whole fucking city next" (quoted in Moore, 1999: 55). In a possible act of retaliation for challenging city hall, city officials claimed that Guyton's privately owned Canfield Project studio was hazardous to the community; it was demolished along with two hundred of his artworks stored inside (Whitfield, 2000: 191).

Guyton and those who support his project have repeatedly asked why, among the thousands of abandoned structures in the city, his assemblages often seemed to be at the top of the city's list for demolition during this period. According to calculations in the late 1980s, there were approximately 15,000 vacant structures in Detroit, totalling more than 55,000 abandoned buildings and vacant lots; a survey in 2010 counted 33,529 empty houses and 91,488 vacant lots.[24] The targeted destruction of Guyton's rogue installations appears to have been motivated in part because they provided a symbolic commentary on Detroit's national reputation as a decaying, ruined city, and his spectacles of debris drew attention to a part of Detroit, and Detroit's past, that some city officials wanted to ignore or forget. When I spoke with Guyton about his relationship with city officials and the public responses to his project, he said,

> Some like it, some hate it, some want to destroy it, some want to steal it. But I always get a response. They used to call me the "Voodoo Man of Heidelberg Street," some still call me crazy, they don't like all this. But there is a science to this madness, a system to this mess. I'm taking the junk of the city, making it special, and putting it in people's faces. The city of Detroit wanted to forget this part of town, that we are here. Let me get political with it, the governor, the city officials, they tried to tear it down, I've had lots of run-ins with all of them, and I've dealt with it. You have to stand up for what you believe. I chose to fight back. . . . This is America, and I decided I'm going to call their asses out. And I did. Well, I won some battles, and they did too,

but I'm still here. I've learned you got to be patient, it's like baby steps, a little bit at a time, to make things change.[25]

Guyton is obviously no isolated outsider artist. He took art courses at Detroit's Marygrove College and the College for Creative Studies before dropping out of school in 1982. He says he has tried to forget his art school training. His inspiration for the project comes from dreams, his religious belief that he has a spiritual mission to renew his neighborhood, and from his Grandpa Mackey, a former house painter and handyman who put a paintbrush in Guyton's hand and supported him during times of despair. "My grandpa was my best friend. He always encouraged me. There were bad times, I don't talk about those. But he was the one who always was there for me."[26] Despite the outsider-art label that often is attached to Guyton's environment, his work is a neighborhood-based, public art project, and his displays share some similarities with other African American art environments and reflect certain vernacular traditions, including the creolized visual language of yard shows, bottle trees, the aesthetic use of recycled material, and the protective use of certain objects. As noted in chapter three, the aesthetic use of debris and recycled material traditionally has been a means of investing the African American yard and "home ground" with a sense of rootedness, and is characterized by specific themes —all of which seem evident in Guyton's displays on Heidelberg Street: protection, personal virtuosity, community improvement, and honor to family and ancestors.[27] Created in part as a means of guarding against drug dealers and the dangers of his neighborhood, Guyton's environment may reflect these traditions of safeguard and protection; in Robert Farris Thompson's opinion, Guyton's use of circular objects like tires, hubcaps, and clock faces is an expression of central-African ideas of "motion" that not only activate dilapidated structures but also repel or "wheel away" criminals (1998: 43–44). Guyton's project does exhibit other elements that Thompson has identified as being central to the visual displays of African American yard shows, including "*motion* (wheels, tires, hubcaps, pinwheels); *containment* (jars, jugs, flasks, bottles, especially on trees and porches); *figuration* (plaster icons, dolls, root sculptures, metal images); and *medicine*" (1998: 45), although instead of surrounding houses with traditional charms and healing herbs, Guyton has used discarded objects to protect and heal the neighborhood. The idea of the healing potential of art has been a part of

Guyton's project from the start, as he notes: "It was my way of using art as a medicine to make a difference in that community" (quoted in Steele, 2011).

When I asked Guyton about the possible African or African American influences on this art, he responded, "Well, I don't know. My grandfather encouraged me, he was the one who helped me in my art, and so I guess there *could* be connections." He then quickly added,

> But these are my own ideas too. . . . This art is more about . . . shaping your world and bringing order into the equation. I had to create order, there was so much craziness here—crack houses, junkies, hoodlums, prostitutes, trash, ruins, fear after the riots in 1967. It was chaos down here. So what do you do? I realized even chaos has order, so I gave all this madness a new order. . . . Most people here are trapped, they are cut off from that hope, the idea that things can change. So that's what I try to do, show that things can change. . . . Working out here on the street is different, this is not the gallery, or the university, where people are all tight-assed about art, and afraid to get worked up. . . . I'm *glad* you're talking to me about this. We need people to get excited, or angry, or whatever, to wake people up these days, to the problems here, and in the world.[28]

Children on bikes visit a shoe display at the Heidelberg Project, created by Tyree Guyton to symbolize the thousands of displaced and homeless people in Detroit, c. 2004. Photograph Larry Peplin. Courtesy of Heidelberg Project Archive.

Among his creations that involve social commentary, Guyton's yard assemblage "Clean this Mutha Up" is dedicated to the city of Detroit and consists of rows of painted vacuum cleaners standing upright with gloves on their handles, a jab at the city's neglect of urban blight and decline of neighborhoods. Guyton says his sidewalks lined with shoes represent those standing in unemployment lines, while various piles and assemblages of thousands of shoes in vacant lots ("A Lot of Shoes") symbolize the thousands of wandering homeless in the city of Detroit. He spread hundreds of shoes across Heidelberg Street, to be run over by cars and to be beaten by the elements, to represent the plight of the homeless. After the 1991

demolition of much of his project, Guyton looked to the skies and incorporated the nearby trees into his environment as a safeguard, believing the city would not destroy the trees. His piece, “Soles of the Most High,” consists of hundreds of pairs of shoes hanging from the branches of a tree, a representation of the lynching of African Americans in the south, based on the childhood memories of his grandfather, who said that when he looked up at the lifeless hanging corpses, “All that could be seen were the soles of the shoes” (quoted in Heidelberg Project, no date). Guyton has created other assemblages of shoes, including an old oven stuffed with shoes to represent those who suffered and died in the concentration camps of the Holocaust (Heidelberg Project, no date).

Although some assemblages represent human suffering or crimes against humanity, or memorialize those who have been killed, others address issues of civil rights, such as Guyton’s painted bus, “Move to the Rear,” a tribute to Rosa Parks, a long-time resident of Detroit. After meeting the civil rights pioneer, he had a dream of creating art with a bus, and soon after, someone donated a passenger bus manufactured in 1955, the same year that Parks refused to surrender her seat to a white person on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Guyton painted the bus with polka dots, which for him symbolize diversity, racial and cultural differences, and the hope for racial harmony, the overall similarity among people (Heidelberg Project, 2004). Guyton’s Polka Dot House (the Dotty Wotty House, also referred to as the New White House) was inspired by Martin Luther King’s vision of racial equality and harmony, significant in the context of the segregation and racial divide in Detroit. Polka dots are splashed across the other structures on Heidelberg Street and the street itself, enlivening with color an otherwise drab environment. Guyton also has painted polka dots on hundreds of abandoned structures throughout Detroit to draw attention to the empty buildings, and this motif has become his artistic signature, a tribute to his Grandpa Mackey, and inspired by his grandfather’s love of jelly beans (Mackey requested to be buried in a polka-dot painted casket and Guyton honored his wish).

Tyree Guyton's painted bus tribute to civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks and his "Faces of God" paintings, Heidelberg Project, 1997. Photograph Daniel Wojcik.

Guyton created his "OJ House" after the O. J. Simpson murder case in 1995, the most publicized criminal trial in American history. Guyton told me that the letters "OJ" painted all over the house stand for "Obstruction of Justice," and the house is a critique of the "media circus" and exploitation of the trial, the racist undertones in the coverage, the American obsession with celebrities, the media's larger neglect of the injustices and violence committed on marginalized people everyday, and global obstruction of justice generally.[29] During the war in Iraq, Guyton began painting the word "WAR" on numerous displays, reflecting his belief that the war was initiated for the wrong reasons while important issues at home, such as poverty, health care, urban decay, and racism were being ignored by the government. He says he tries not to preach to people about war through his art, but he simply "puts the word out there. I don't tell people what it means. I want them to think about it. Some think it is only about the war in the Middle East. But it could be about the damn war that goes on in our heads. Or the war in Detroit, the 1967 riots—that was a war, too."[30] In 2011, Guyton

completed an installation called “Street Folk,” which involved carpeting an entire block of Edmund Street near the Heidelberg Project with more than ten thousand discarded, donated, and painted shoes. Like his earlier piece “A Lot of Shoes,” he created this installation to draw attention to the Detroit’s large homeless population, and in this case he employed local homeless people to help him with the assemblage, while encouraging those who needed shoes to take a pair.

The urban art displays of Guyton’s Heidelberg Project share features with the “folk assemblages” described by folklorist Jack Santino in his studies of political public displays, seasonal yard constructions, and grassroots memorials that involve arrangements of discrete items to create a larger and more complex symbolic public statement with social, aesthetic, and political messages.[31] Characterized by juxtaposition and bricolage, such assemblages require observers to work through the layers of symbolic meaning evoked by disparate objects that are joined together in often incongruous or startling ways. At an early age, out of necessity, Guyton learned the do-it-yourself techniques of bricolage, resourcefully creating with things salvaged from the streets and trash. The concept of bricolage does not necessarily have connotations of subversion in its original usage, but later revisions of the idea by cultural theorists link its techniques to resistance, whether in youth subcultural styles, oppositional tactics in the work place, or the “textual poaching” of fans who rework the products of mass culture.[32] The use of bricolage in these contexts is seen as a challenge to conventional uses and interpretations, as objects are refigured and recontextualized through juxtapositions that create new and potentially oppositional meanings; these creative and sometimes shocking recombinations may then destabilize established cultural boundaries or expose the ways dominant ideologies are constructed (Hebdige, 1979: 102–106, 117–127).

Like the subcultural bricoleur, Guyton’s recontextualizing of objects—the hundreds of shoes scattered in the street or placed in an oven, the naked dolls crucified on houses, the Bible in a toilet, the discarded toys and stuffed animals nailed to trees—disturb the normative contexts of things, and through excess and irony, challenge the symbolic order. In this way, such displays may be perceived as a direct confrontation to societal order, evoking a “moral panic” and the labeling of Guyton’s environment as a threat to ideas about art, neighborhood, and societal values in general. His

use of abandoned structures and vacant lots resembles the appropriation of public space by street artists and culture jammers who express activist or subversive ideas, whether through flier art, stencil or graffiti artwork, street installations, or video and LED art. Like Guyton's project, such urban street art, unsanctioned and often illegal, challenges elitist notions of what art is, who can make art, and how it is displayed. Similar to other environments that have provoked controversy and been condemned by city authorities, the Heidelberg Project is a site of ideological contestation, a commentary on notions of public and private space, art and trash, consumerism and materialism, and community and social justice.

Guyton's use of discards and junk bears some resemblance to shock tactics and anti-artworks of the Dadaists, such as the Readymades of Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), which consisted of found objects modified and presented as art. In 1917 Duchamp famously outraged the art world with his piece entitled "Fountain," a recycled urinal that he signed and dated for exhibition in a gallery. While Duchamp's work caused great controversy and subverted the conventions of the elite art world, Guyton's project addresses a larger public context in an equally controversial and subversive manner, and demonstrates the ways that "insider" and "outsider" artists may share intentions, impulses, and tactics in their efforts to shock, communicate ideas, and transform society. The reconfiguration of commonplace objects at the Heidelberg Project also may be compared to other assemblage and installation art that includes cast-off materials, such as the work of Ed Kienholz, Robert Rauschenberg, and Joseph Cornell, or the *Merzbau* of Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) in the early 1920s, which involved the use of salvaged materials to alter the interiors of houses into transformed sculptural environments. Like other installations and environmental art, Guyton's three-dimensional assemblages transform the perception of specific spaces and blur the boundaries between art and everyday life. Those who visit his project are immersed in the multi-sensory experience of the place. As neighbors, tourists, and curious Detroiters interact with the environment, with Guyton, and with each other—exploring, questioning, laughing, or criticizing—they too become a part of the project, an active component contributing to the performance of the place, which constantly changes, day by day and year by year. Heidelberg Street is not only a nexus of human activity, but an oasis of hope in the urban ghetto, a carnivalesque alternative

to the decline and desecration of the inner city that offers the possibility of change and renewal.

From the beginning of his project, Guyton has invited the participation of community members. Some people in his neighborhood have responded and brought him things, especially the local children, who help on a regular basis and flock around Guyton as he works. Children have always been an important part of Guyton's environment, according to Duane Noriyuki, who recalls the early years of the project: "It was interesting to me that children, more than adults, seemed to understand Tyree. They were drawn to the project without caring what it was, only that it was a whimsical distraction from daily life in the 'hood. The children were a part of his art, not only because they were invited to participate in its creation but also because seeing them play at Heidelberg transformed his work into living art. It was a much different experience when the children weren't there. At night, it was haunting, but when children were playing, it was entirely different, their play made it alive in a different way."[33] Over the years, Guyton expanded his effort to involve local children in art making at the site. He also began offering an after-school art program in the mid-1990s at the nearby Ralph Bunche Elementary School, in response to the fact that most Detroit Public Schools no longer had art programs.

In addition to introducing children to creative activities, Guyton says that his street displays are meant to transform his community in other ways, attracting people to his neighborhood and communicating with those who have never visited an art gallery or museum. "This is art in the real world, where people live, not in some gallery. Most people around here don't care about art in a gallery, maybe they never been to a gallery, so I put it right in front of their faces, expose them to color, shapes, forms. And it creates a brand new conversation, it helps people to see in a new way. Not only the people who live here, but it brings in outsiders to this part of town, people who would *never* come here. They come from the suburbs, from all over the US, all over the world. And this is good for all of us. It is educating the world. And the people who live here get to meet new people, so they are not isolated or forgotten."[34] In recent years, as Guyton has received awards and recognition for his work, support for his project has increased and resulted in various community events, including street festivals and concerts. There have been discussions of developing the environment and nearby lots into a "cultural village" for arts education, a community-based, sustainable,

“green” urban area that will revitalize the neighborhood and perhaps serve as a model for other post-industrial “shrinking cities” (Heidelberg Project, 2011; Shibley et al., 2005).

Created in an attempt to confront the personal traumas of childhood and the decline of his neighborhood, Guyton’s Heidelberg Project has grown from a condemned collection of trash to become the third largest tourist attraction in Detroit. For three decades, Guyton has collected objects condemned as worthless—perhaps like the lives of those living in the ghetto, people who often feel that they have been cast off, beaten down, and broken—and given these abandoned things new life and meaning. In the process, he has transformed his neighborhood from a place where people were afraid to walk the streets into a safe haven of reconfigured objects and polka-dotted structures, a site of play and social commentary, a place where neighbors, curious Detroiters, and out-of-towners now congregate and interact. Those in support of the Heidelberg Project say that since its beginning more than twenty-five years ago, there have been no serious crimes reported on Heidelberg Street, and gang violence and drug trafficking there have been largely eliminated (Alvin, 2006; Shibley et al., 2005; Heidelberg Project, 2011). Guyton’s grassroots effort at urban renewal expresses a singular vision of neighborhood empowerment and an affirmation of the inner city, and demonstrates how the creative process may serve as a source of healing and transformation for individuals and communities. As Guyton has stated, “I can take anything and put meaning into it, but to take it beyond and use it as medicine to make a person well again, that is where the art is. . . . I’m not here to argue aesthetics. I’m here to talk about how the project’s working to bring life to the community” (quoted in Flores, 2004).

The Bottle Village of Tressa Prisbrey

The construction of meaning from recycled materials and the relationship between creativity, adversity, and community is further illustrated by the artistic endeavors of Tressa “Grandma” Prisbrey, who built her Bottle Village in Simi Valley, California. Covering a third of an acre, Bottle Village is one of the few existing monumental art environments constructed by a woman. Now in a state of disrepair, her environment consisted of fifteen structures as well as gardens, sculptures, wishing wells, shrines, planters,

and colorful mosaic floors, built from bottles, cement, and objects gathered from the local dump, which Prisbrey would visit regularly in her Studebaker pickup truck. Prisbrey (1896–1988) began her project in 1956 at age sixty, and although she sometimes said Bottle Village was simply a hobby to keep her busy in old age, her motives were also practical: she built a six-by-twelve foot room to store her thousands of commemorative pencils, and she constructed a thirty-foot long bottle wall to keep out the dust and feathers of the poultry farm next to her property. Having little money, she could not afford cement building blocks, so she used the bottles salvaged from the nearby dump and her husband's drinking habit, displaying the bottles perhaps as a way to publicly embarrass him. Prisbrey apparently got the idea for building with bottles after she saw the Bottle House at the Knott's Berry Farm theme park in Buena Park, California, which was modeled after a bottle house built around 1905 in a gold mining town in Nevada.[35]

Mosaic tile walk way and the Rumpus Room house at Tressa Prisbrey's Bottle Village, Simi Valley, California, c. 1973. Courtesy Barbra Williamson, Preserve Bottle Village.

After building her bottle wall, Prisbrey added more structures, including the Pencil House, the Round House, the Rumpus Room (made of 180,000 bottles), the Shot Glass House, the School House, Cleopatra's Bedroom, the Shell House, a Shrine to All Faiths, and the Doll House (also known as the Home of the Little Mothers/Parade of the Dolls). As she worked energetically and persistently from the age of sixty until her mid-seventies, her environment grew by accretion and she maintained it until her health declined in the 1980s. When she was in her eighties, she said she "took two days off" to count the number of bottles in her village, and the total was one million and fifteen bottles. Through her building techniques with various colored bottles (that she sometimes painted to add more color), Prisbrey created iridescent lighting effects, her translucent structures of glass radiating color from within. Like other environment builders, she created from unconventional materials, salvaging whatever she found to be useful or pleasing. She was an obsessive collector who sometimes created unsettling effects through her techniques of bricolage: her Doll Head Shrine, consisting of decaying baby doll heads impaled on pipes and broomsticks, competes with the assemblages of the Surrealists and the imagery of the gothic macabre.[36]

Tressa Prisbrey with her collection of dolls at Bottle Village, c. 1973. Courtesy Barbra Williamson, Preserve Bottle Village.

Prisbrey said her creative activity was an expression of her "prickly" independence, her insistence on self-reliance, and her desire to prove that a poor, ordinary woman could make something extraordinary out of nothing.[37] As she put it, "Anyone can do anything with a million dollars—look at Disney. But it takes more than money to make something out of nothing, and look at the fun I have doing it" (Prisbrey, circa 1960: 3). She appeared unfazed by those who called her crazy or were hostile to her project. As an elderly woman she seemed to enjoy bucking societal conventions and the restrictive gender roles at the time. She engineered and built the structures by herself (with occasional help from her sons with the roofs), proudly exclaiming, "I done all the framework my self. Even the men tell me they don't know how I done it" (in the film by Light and Saraf, 1982). Like other environments, Prisbrey's village has been called an eyesore and a collection of trash. After the 1994 Northridge earthquake, a number of her structures were severely damaged and the site has been in decay since that time. Restoration efforts have been difficult, worsened by the hostilities of

politicians, two of whom submitted a bill that blocked a $455,000 dollar FEMA grant that would have restored much of Bottle Village after the earthquake, arguing that the funds were a waste of taxpayers' money.[38]

Doll Head Shrine, Tressa Prisbrey's Bottle Village, 1990s. Photograph Ted Degener.

As noted, Prisbrey's stated reasons for creating her environment were pragmatic and didactic—a wall to cut the noise and stave off the stench from the neighboring poultry farm; storage space to house her pencil collection and extend her living space beyond the cramped quarters of the trailer; the recycling of her husband's empty beer bottles as a way to shame him; and as

a place of entertainment for her grandchildren. However, when reviewing the history of Prisbrey's life, it is clear that the hardship that she suffered was a significant motivation for her building activities, and that the creative process sustained her during times of personal tragedy, especially in regard to the illnesses and premature deaths of her children. Prisbrey was born Thresie Luella Schafer (also spelled Schaefer and Shafer) in a small farming community in Easton, Minnesota, the youngest of eight children in a family with limited means. At the age of fifteen, she was married to the fifty-two-year-old ex-husband of her eldest sister, a man who was known for his personal indiscretions and questionable business practices (Greenfield, 1991: 48). Accounts differ about the circumstances that led to her marriage to Theodore Grinolds, although Prisbrey later speculated that she "was sold" to Grinolds, who in return bought her father a blacksmith shop and a new set of furniture (in the film by Light and Saraf, 1982). After fourteen years of marriage and seven children, she and Grinolds separated. He died a few years later and she was left to support her children on her own. The details of her life at this point are vague and sometimes contradictory, and Prisbrey herself provided conflicting information when she was interviewed in the early 1980s, perhaps because of her advanced age. It is known that she worked as a waitress in North Dakota and became involved in politics there, and then moved to Seattle with her children where she was employed as a parts assembler for the Boeing Corporation during World War II (Light and Saraf, 1982).

In 1946, Prisbrey moved to California. She lived in a trailer on the property of her sister Hattie in Santa Susana (later to be renamed the Simi Valley), an unpopulated and rural area about forty miles northwest of Los Angeles. She and Hattie worked at the Tapo Citrus Company, and in the early 1950s Prisbrey began constructing a cement block house in a vacant lot near her sister's house. During this time, she met Al Prisbrey, a construction worker who helped with the building of the cement house. They married soon after. They relocated in 1955 to the vacant lot that became the site of Bottle Village, living in a small wooden trailer. Fifty-nine years old and tired of relocating, Prisbrey removed and hid the tires of the trailer, and soon after began building her village. Her husband Al apparently had no interest in the construction project, although as mentioned, the empty bottles from his drinking habit seemed to serve as one source of inspiration, as she hints at in her self-published booklet: "Goodness knows there were enough of them

around, so a collection of bottles, all shapes and all sizes, started to find their way to my front yard. Putting them together in a heap invited me to do something with them. . . . I completed a 30 foot long wall out of glass bottles, built a six by twelve room on the bank, and put steps at each end of the wall. Thus began bottle village" (Prisbrey, circa 1960: 1).

Dolls stacked in front of an orange bottle wall, with portraits of John and Robert F. Kennedy and Tressa Prisbrey, Bottle Village, 1990s. Photograph Ted Degener.

Prisbrey was a resilient women who endured an inordinate number of ordeals throughout her life: the sudden ending of her childhood at fifteen with a marriage to a fifty-two-year old man with a sleazy reputation, and the subsequent responsibilities of young motherhood; her separation from her husband and his death in 1931, leaving her a widow with seven children to support; and the deaths of two men she hoped to marry (one a B-movie actor in Westerns, Jack "Pappy" Kirk, who died suddenly of a heart attack, and

another suitor who was killed overseas). During the time that she worked on her project in the 1950s and 1960s, all of her brothers and sisters died except one, her husband Al was killed in a car accident, her children became ill with unexplained diseases, and five of them died, apparently of cancer. Prisbrey began her project in 1956, roughly a year after the death of her daughter Velma, who was thirty-six years old when she passed away (Prisbrey, circa 1960; Light and Saraf, 1982; SPACES/Preserve Bottle Village Committee, 1999). Some of her village was built for her dying children, such as the house she constructed for one son who was ill and returned to live with her in the late 1950s; and she decorated a "rose room" and built a heart-shaped rose planter for her dying daughter, who loved roses. As Prisbrey explained, "I had my daughter staying out here. The girl was thirty-five years old and was dying of cancer, and she liked roses so well, so I says, 'I'll go down to the dump and get you some headlights and make you a rose garden.' So I did. And I put about twenty rose roots in there because I wanted them to bloom before she died. Well, she lived a year, but she seen 'em. The morning she come out here to see her roses, they died, the same morning she did. Can you imagine that?" (in the film by Light and Saraf, 1982). Although Prisbrey is often portrayed in superficial ways as a spunky eccentric, there is no denying that she faced enormous tragedy and loss during her life, and her constructions were often acts of love and solace, built to ease the suffering of her children. She created hospice rooms for them from junk and continued to embellish and maintain her structures throughout these tragic years. The creative process clearly helped ease her pain and repeated encounters with loss.

Detail of wall with inlaid bottles, car head lights, and photographs, Tressa Prisbrey's Bottle Village, c. 1973. Courtesy Barbra Williamson, Preserve Bottle Village.

The death of a child is regarded by many as the most devastating loss that can befall a person, marked by overwhelming feelings of grief and guilt that often haunt the bereaved throughout their lives (Bernstein, 1997; Rosof, 1994). Although Prisbrey sometimes mentioned the circumstances associated with the deaths of her children, she said relatively little about her own feelings of loss, acknowledging only that "After my kids died, I kept building houses and it kept me from getting too lonely. . . . you lose kids like that and it kinda hurts you" (quoted in Michelson, 1982: 31). Like many others, she had difficulty speaking about the deaths of her children, but the

familiar and comforting act of building and maintaining Bottle Village was one way to address or distract her from her grief, similar to the ways that Tyree Guyton and Nek Chand immersed themselves in the collection and creative display of found objects to counter troubling memories and pain. As noted previously, in response to the shattering effects of tragedy and traumatic events, and the ensuing emotional chaos and sense of disorder, the methodical process of searching for scattered discards and constructing meaningful assemblages from cast-off objects mirrors the personal search for order, structure, and a reconstructed self. For some individuals, the act of recycling may become interwoven with the sense of loss and correspond to the process of grieving: grievers experience loss, recyclers save things that have been lost; in grief, one's life is in pieces; but recycling enables one to salvage the pieces, to physically and emotionally put things back together, and create a renewed sense of order, beauty, and self-worth.[39]

View of bottle display, bottle house, and dolls at Tressa Prisbrey's Bottle Village, c. 1973. Courtesy Barbra Williamson, Preserve Bottle Village.

Prisbrey's Bottle Village not only provided a means of dealing with loss and sorrow through the creative process, but it helped to decrease her sense of loneliness during difficult times by offering opportunities to interact with visitors. Prisbrey gave tours for a nominal fee (from ten cents to seventy-five cents over the years), telling stories and jokes, and when the tours ended in the meditation room, she often would play the piano and sing bawdy songs (Light and Saraf, 1982). Through her storytelling, humor, and musical performances she ultimately created a surrogate family of those interested people who visited her environment. These encounters with visitors transported her from her troubles, and the praise and amazement they expressed at her creations connected her to others and definitely increased her sense of self-worth, as she clearly relished the wide range of responses to her project (Light and Saraf, 1982; Prisbrey, circa 1960). She also fully embraced the identity of "Grandma" after the loss of her children, a term of endearment and love, and extended it to the people she met, friends and strangers alike, in a familial manner.

When examining Prisbrey's structures and collections of objects, one realizes that they evoke memories of childhood and her dead children—her environment contained hundreds of baby dolls, mother-child imagery, family and heart themes, and photos of her children and grandchildren. Unlike the dismembered and disfigured dolls that populated Guyton's Heidelberg Project in its early years and that expressed themes concerning child abuse and neglect, Prisbrey's creations express nostalgia for the past, for happier times when her children were young, and perhaps even a return to her own lost childhood.[40] She seemed to lose herself in the past that was evoked by discarded things, describing her forays to the dump as "a never ending source of interest and a priceless experience" and explaining that the search and salvaging of cast-off objects "brings out memories of better things, happier days, children growing up and getting married, grammar school days and books and pictures" (Prisbrey, circa 1960: 9). Over the years she gathered hundreds of dolls from the burial ground of the dump. As she said, "It's a graveyard for lost articles, discarded treasures, worn out everything. Especially dolls. I found so many dolls I couldn't resist the temptation to bring them home and dress them" (Prisbrey, circa 1960: 3). Rescuing these discarded dolls, taking them home, cleaning them, and creating new clothes for them, she transformed them from trash into objects of care and affection. As her children died and as she aged, retrieving the dolls and caring for them

seemed to become more important. Her dolls became her companions, recovered from the graveyard of lost things and brought back to life, as they were nurtured, displayed, and protected within the shelter of her constructions. One hesitates to speculate further about the emotional and psychological meanings of Prisbrey's rescuing and reviving of lost dolls, but clearly her doll-work helped with her grief, allowed her to revisit the happier times of the past, and created social bonds with others. The childhood realm she populated with dolls recalls the family of dolls created by Morton Bartlett, discussed previously, who was orphaned at the age of eight and later in his life gave form to his own family of half-sized children, which he sculpted, clothed, and photographed, positioning his child-dolls laughing, reading, sleeping, or weeping in ways that are both affectionate and disturbing.

Prisbrey describes in some detail the conversations she had with other women about her surrogate doll family, swapping stories, reminiscing, and sometimes receiving dolls as gifts from them (Prisbrey, circa 1960; Light and Saraf, 1982). She may have been playing with dolls, but it was not meaningless play. It was a creative and cathartic source of solace, an escape from painful memories that also allowed for enjoyable interactions with others, and the socializing was therapeutic in itself. Like Prisbrey, a number of other self-taught artists have used or made dolls in response to misfortune or grief, and their "play" with dolls has sometimes served similar therapeutic functions. Nellie Mae Rowe, for instance, transformed her house and yard in Fayette, Georgia, into an entire art environment that she called her "playhouse," as a way to cope with her loneliness after the death of her second husband, decorating the place with drawings and sculptures and filling it with dolls she made from recycled objects (Kogan, 1998). Annie Hooper created thousands of biblically inspired doll-like sculptures to help her deal with loneliness and severe bouts of depression. And Bessie Harvey said that the dolls and figures she made from roots and other found materials helped her cope with stress and family misfortunes: "I was trying to play with my dolls . . . and then that always seemed to release the pressure" (Carr, Farber, and Weiss, 1990: 66).

In his seminal text on the importance of play and its relation to creativity, historian and anthropologist Johan Huizinga explains that true play provides a sense of freedom, enthusiasm, and heightened awareness, creating a space for an alternative realm of consciousness and activities. In the domain of

play, one temporarily steps into an alternate world that exists apart from the strictures and necessities of ordinary life (Huizinga, 1950: 132). As Diane Ackerman further elaborates, “Play is a refuge from ordinary life, a sanctuary of the mind where one is exempt from life’s customs, methods, decrees. Play always has a sacred space—some version of a playground—in which it happens” (1999: 16). From this perspective, the world of play has qualities of its own that absorb and engage the player completely and which may be entwined with the artistic process. When Prisbrey began building her Bottle Village at the age of fifty-nine, her vacant lot was a dusty wasteland next to a poultry farm that she transformed through her ingenuity into a playground of creativity, where she discovered her artistic abilities as she completely immersed herself in the process of aesthetic recycling and construction. Later in life, her village also became a sanctuary of childhood memories and maternal care that provided a way of coping with the deaths of her children, a safe haven from the tragedies of the outside world. Bottle Village offered a spatial and emotional refuge that could be controlled and maintained, yet endlessly explored and expanded through acts of creativity that also provided others a place of community and communion, with seemingly beneficial effects for all who were involved.

The self-made worlds of Tressa Prisbrey, Sabato Rodia, Nek Chand, and Tyree Guyton all grew by accretion into expansive environmental art realms, and the process of creatively recycling cast-off items transformed personal pain and hardship into monuments that testify to human resourcefulness and inventive genius. Against all odds and frequently in the face of ongoing animosity, the imaginative endeavors by self-taught individuals sometimes have had a larger transformative effect on others and their communities. Creating with the detritus of industrial, consumer society, these environment builders had little or no formal training in the techniques and materials they employed. With increased experience, however, they became master bricoleurs, learning from their initial efforts, experimenting with different materials and ideas, and expressing their individual visions in bold and relentless ways. Each of them began their artistic activities largely as a pastime and for highly personal reasons rooted in emotional issues. Engaged by the creative act, they discovered over time that the enterprise had therapeutic effects, initiating a process of personal transformation. They recognized the possible healing properties of creativity and were able to

articulate this to some degree, fully embracing art making throughout their lives.

Although at times provoking antagonistic responses, eventually each of their self-built environments began to resonate with some segments of the community, and ultimately each site became a major attraction, sometimes transforming communities in remarkable ways. Despite the outsider-art label and seemingly idiosyncratic nature of these places, they are suffused with vernacular influences and embedded in local culture, as their creators, like all individuals who create things, drew upon traditional sources and ideas for inspiration and design elements. It is this interplay between individual creativity and vernacular vocabularies that makes these environments so evocative and yet so unsettling for some—a fusion of the familiar and unknown, reflecting hints of tradition that have been reshaped or overshadowed by the intensity of individual innovation and creative vision. The power and controversy of such spectacular vernacular places reside in the multivalent meanings they evoke: as liminal spaces, folk heterotopias, illegal assemblages of trash, counter-hegemonic critiques, illustrations of compulsive creativity, carnivalesque assemblages, empowering artistic achievements, or unanticipated sites of community transformation and cultural resonance.

The next chapter of this study addresses in greater detail one of the recurring themes evident among the previously discussed environment builders as well as various other individuals labeled outsider artists: that of personal tragedy and suffering, which sometimes is at the heart of the creative process. While experiences of trauma and adversity are acknowledged in the literature, and in some cases have been exploited in voyeuristic ways as a marketing strategy to establish the art brut authenticity of outsiders, the deeper relationship between trauma, emotional pain, and the creative process among such individuals has not received the analytical attention it deserves. In response to these sometimes superficial and market-driven biographical descriptions, the following chapter contextualizes the lives of various self-taught artists in an effort to provide an understanding of the complexities of the artistic impulse and its relationship to life crisis. The experiences and views of artists themselves are presented, offering insights into the possible connections between trauma, creativity, personal transformation, and the therapeutic aspects of art making.

Chapter 5

Trauma, Suffering, and Art Making

The behavioral perspective advocated throughout this study offers a corrective alternative to the often decontextualized and romanticized misrepresentations of so-called outsider artists, exploring their links to communities, traditions, and larger society. While previous chapters have examined the influence of life experiences and sociocultural contexts upon the artistic process, this final chapter considers in greater detail the role of creativity in addressing adversity, focusing on the views of the artists themselves. Although there is an extensive body of literature on art therapy practice and theory in the clinical setting, there is much less written about the spontaneous creation of art by individuals such as those discussed in this work, who, through their own ingenuity, have used creativity as a form of self-therapy in relation to grieving over a loss, coping with traumatic events, confronting stressful situations, or dealing with mental illness.

As mentioned previously, discussions of the relation between suffering, trauma, and artistic activity inevitably run the risk of reinforcing clichéd ideas about the “suffering artist” or pathologizing individuals in reductionist ways. To clarify and restate my earlier assertions: creativity is not inevitably interwoven with suffering; tragedy and emotional pain are not prerequisites for artistic activity;

and the creative outputs of the vast majority of individuals labeled "outsider artists," "visionary artists," "self-taught artists," and artists in general are not necessarily related to trauma or life crisis. Although many of the individuals discussed in this study have used creativity as a way to cope with misfortune, they are not presented here as somehow representative of self-taught or "outsider" artists overall. The objective has been to provide a more nuanced and thorough understanding of the various personal and cultural influences on artistic behavior, with particular emphasis on the ways that some individuals have confronted difficult life situations through art making. Once again, the point is that the experiences and creative responses of these artists are not entirely idiosyncratic. By contextualizing their artistic responses to adversity and trauma, their experiences may be understood as a part of the human condition that all of us may encounter to some extent.

Within the field of folklore studies, a growing body of literature has addressed the relationship of emotional trauma, life crisis, and the potentially therapeutic aspects of art making. As noted previously, the influential early study of the possible therapeutic aspects of creativity, Michael Owen Jones's *The Hand Made Object and Its Maker* (1975), documents the art and life of Kentucky chairmaker Chester Cornett, who often built his chairs in an effort to deal with his marital problems, the disabilities of his children, his poverty, his shyness, his traumatic experiences in the army, and his longing for the past.[1] Jones provides particular insights into issues of grief and melancholy, contextualizing the ways that Cornett expressed his emotional pain and nostalgia for the past through artistic activity, old-fashioned ways of dressing, wistful laments, and other forms of expressive behavior. In arguing for a behavioral perspective in the study of human creativity, Jones has repeatedly stated that scholars of art and material culture must consider not only the objects that people make in terms of cultural contexts, but also their reasons for creating things; the processes by which objects are conceptualized and made; and the relation of personality, psychological states, and social interaction (Jones, 1994, 1997). Individuals themselves are often quite aware of the potential therapeutic power of art, and as a number of artists have observed, painful emotions and traumatic experiences sometimes cannot be communicated in words, but the creating of things can be a medium for their expression, an external manifestation of inner turmoil

or overwhelming experiences, and can help clarify issues or restore a sense of self-worth.

Over the years, scholars of expressive behavior have embraced Jones's approach to creativity, the arts of everyday life, and vernacular cultural expression. Folklorist Simon Bronner has applied a similar behavioral perspective in examining the connections between emotional stress, personal anxieties, and the importance of creative activities in his analysis of wood carving among elderly men (Bronner, 1983, 1985, 1996). One carver, Floyd Bennington, says he began carving wooden chains because of anxiety over his retirement. "I've heard it said lots of times; there's something about carving a piece of wood that you have in your hand—it quiets your nerves—just to keep your mind off something else" (quoted in Bronner, 1983: 72). Carving is central to the identities of these men as they grow old, an expression of masculinity in the face of physical decline, and a means of addressing anxieties about aging and death in a way that is creative, artistically fulfilling, and socially acceptable. In many cases, the things they create are obvious physical manifestations of their personal concerns, emotions, and experiences. "When I feel chained, I make chains," the carver Wandley Burch explains; "When I feel caged, I make cages" (quoted in Bronner, 1996: 135).

In another study of the ways that individuals address personal turmoil and trauma, folklorist Varick Chittenden describes the experiences and aesthetic behavior of the disabled Vietnam veteran Michael Cousino (born 1947), who creates war dioramas—miniature scenes of his war experiences and those of other veterans—as a way to deal with the memories and horrors of warfare (Chittenden, 1989, 1995). After returning from Vietnam, Cousino suffered from constant physical pain, disabling injuries, nightmares, and social isolation. Adrift and emotionally devastated, he was encouraged at one point to make a diorama of his traumatic experiences. Salvaging found objects, he began to create small-scale scenes of war experiences, sometimes terrifying reenactments that allowed him to express, contemplate, and contain the memories of his experiences. By reducing trauma into miniature scenes and little figurines that he manipulated by hand, Cousino gradually gained a sense of control and was able to master life crises to some extent. The process of building his scenes was therapeutic not only for him but for other veterans who saw his dioramas, some of whom contributed ideas to his constructions and understood their potential to address the physical and

psychological trauma of the Vietnam War (Chittenden, 1995: 25; 1989: 420–422).

Historically, various forms of folk art and the creations of self-taught individuals have been used to express trauma and grief, and to commemorate the lives of loved ones, illustrated by the traditions of mourning art seen in the form of needlework, jewelry, painting, memorial quilts, and other vernacular forms of memorialization. The most familiar contemporary example, the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, is based in the long-standing tradition of creating quilts from the clothing and memorabilia of the deceased.[2] The largest work of community art in the world, the quilt was created as a way to publically remember and celebrate the lives of individuals who died of AIDS-related causes, and to increase public awareness of the impact of AIDS. Quilt-making often has helped individuals deal with loss, adversity, and the death of loved ones, as folklorist Patricia Turner documents in her study of the culture of quilting among African Americans. She describes one quilter, Elliott Chambers (born 1933), who made a memory quilt after his wife died, sewing it together from her favorite clothing as a tribute to her, a therapeutic act that also evoked happy memories of the times they shared together (Turner, 2009: 41–44). For Ora Knowell (born 1945), making dolls and quilts has been a source of solace throughout her life in the face of racism, physical pain, and as a way to help her deal with the loss of her two sons to urban violence. When the painful memories of her sons' deaths were unbearable, she would quilt, and as Turner notes, the process not only offered a degree of healing, but the mending of the worn and frayed parts of the quilts over time allowed Knowell to do "what she couldn't do in life—continue to work on and nurture" her sons (2009: 62). Although initially an intensely personal and private project, Knowell later extended her quilting activities into the broader community and began making other quilts as tributes to those who were murdered in the city of Oakland, where she lives. She recognized how her quilt-making helped her cope and move forward with her life in the midst of sorrow, and how it could help others by memorializing the dead and offering solace to the grieving.

Lonnie Holley with his sandstone sculptures in his yard, Birmingham, Alabama, c. 1988. Photograph Ted Degener.

The creative activities of Lonnie Holley (born 1950) similarly began in response to emotional pain and as an act of memorialization, and then expanded into a broader awareness of the therapeutic aspects of art for the larger community. Acclaimed as one of the most significant contemporary African American vernacular artists, Holley explains that he first began to create things during a period of despair and severe depression after two of his young nieces were killed in a house fire. Overwhelmed by anguish, Holley prayed to God to help him with his sorrow. He had a vision of himself doing something constructive with his pain, and he then carved tombstones for his nieces, since his family could not afford to buy grave markers. These were his first sculptures. He says he "poured his grief" into making them, realizing that creating things by hand helped him emotionally. "I cut a tombstone out of sandstone and put the babies' names on it. I had no understanding of art but when I saw evidence of how it helped calm me

down and how it helped my family, I appreciated what art could mean" (quoted in Beardsley, 2006: 98).[3]

Holley, who at the time lived east of Birmingham, Alabama, then continued to carve grave markers for other children who had died. The creative process triggered an artistic impulse, and he has since produced thousands of artworks, including paintings, sculptures, carved wood and sandstone pieces, assemblages, as well as a two-acre yard art environment consisting of cast-off metal, tree roots, toys, clothing, old electronic equipment, recycled consumer goods, and other found objects. He associates these cast-off objects with his own painful childhood, likening them to his experience being tossed away as a child. As he tells it, he was the seventh child of twenty-seven children, taken from his mother as an infant and then traded for a pint of whiskey at the age of four. Throughout his childhood he was regularly whipped and beaten; at the age of eight he was run over by a car, which broke his arms and legs and left him in a coma for months; and much of his youth was spent in foster homes, reform schools, and juvenile facilities, some of which were notorious for their brutality.[4] Holley says that he now recognizes the connection between his art making and his having endured these and other experiences of trauma. For him, art is a way of expressing life experiences in a material form that might also help others. "When I took my pain to art, I knew that it was alright because other people would learn from it. I'm giving it to them in a digestible form" (quoted in Uszerowicz, 2013).

Like Tyree Guyton, Holley began creating out of necessity and personal grief, but his subsequent works and his expansive yard art draw upon his cultural heritage and religious beliefs to express issues in his local African American community, as well broader problems in the world such as poverty, drug abuse, racism, injustice, dehumanizing technologies, and the mistreatment of children. Many of his works address human wastefulness and environmental destruction, and by his salvaging of seemingly worthless things, he reclaims their meaning and their essence. He attributes his recycling aesthetic and the placing of value on discarded objects in part to his grandmother, who adopted him when he was fourteen years old. She taught him the worth of all things as the two of them went together to trash dumps in search of items that could be later sold at flea markets. Holley's recycling of cast-off objects not only transforms them into objects of memory but renews their worth, a process expressive of his own

experiences: “I got an opportunity to recycle, in a sense, my own innerness” (quoted in Kemp and Boyer, 1994: 90). Originating in an attempt to help his family and alleviate his own sorrow, Holley’s art making has convinced him of the therapeutic power of the creative process and its ability to help others overcome adversity, heal themselves, and transform their communities. As he puts it, “Art is medicine. Art shows us how to fix the things that need fixing” (quoted in Kelly, 1995: 18).

Lonnie Holley, *The Ancestor Throne Not Strong Enough for No Rock nor No Crack*, 1993. Paint on wood with plastic tubing, artificial flowers, fabric, cord, animal skull bone, net, and string, 70 ½ x 66 x 15 in. (179 x 167.6 x 38.1 cm). Collection American Folk Art Museum, New York; gift of Luise Ross (2000.10.1). Photograph John Parnell.

Grief, Memorialization, and Creativity

The connection between the experience of grief and the creative impulse has long been observed, as many important works of art, literature, and music have been created in response to intense feelings of loss and bereavement. The traumatic upheaval of personal loss can be overwhelming, leaving the mourner with an abundance of frustration, confusion, anger, and sadness that may be unbearable unless channeled or displaced into productive action. While the idea that grief can lead to creative action is not a new realization, it is a notion that was eclipsed for a time in the work of Freud and other psychoanalysts by an emphasis on pathologies and stages (Katz, 2001: 1). As an emotional process, mourning encompasses a period of transition and healing as the chaos of grief is dealt with and a sense of order is gradually restored. Something of this functional aspect of mourning is heard in the popular parlance and common expressions that describe the "work" of grief and mourning. Although the labor of grief is primarily effected on the inner realms of the psyche, the abundance of unruly and painful emotions can find release in kinetic, physical output in the form of the creative process.

In his influential *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), Freud stressed mourning as a process through which one disentangles his or her attachments to the lost loved one so that new attachments might be forged. In this way mourning is essential to resolving the pangs of grief and maintaining the ego's stability. From this perspective, the bounds between self and other need to be reaffirmed and redirected in order for the mourner to reconstruct his or her life such that forward movement is possible and the absence of the deceased does not become an immobilizing obstruction to the maintenance of the ego. Failure to complete this process of disentanglement can lead to a prolonged and potentially pathological mourning state referred to as melancholia, in which the mourner is unable to separate from that which has been lost and remains attached to it, unable to reclaim the parts of the self that had been so deeply connected to the lost loved one.

The emphasis on procedural mourning has led to theories involving the stages of grief, the terminology of which creates an illusion of concreteness and chronology of mourning as a step-by-step process with various phases, from grief to healing. The work of the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross on the stages of grief has gained the most traction over the years, often misunderstood to comprise a strict sequence and temporal limit that portrays

the mourning process as a quantifiable progression. In her influential book *On Death and Dying* (1969), Kübler-Ross introduced her model of the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The Kübler-Ross schema became quite popular after its publication and remains the paradigm of the grieving process most firmly entrenched in the minds of the general public, due in part to abundant references to it in film and popular culture. However, other research on grieving reveals that personal responses do not proceed in a standard five-stage process as proposed, but are variable, as individuals respond and cope with grief in different ways. For example, psychologist John Bowlby's work (1961, 1973, 1979) on the development of attachment theory as a psychological method suggests that mourning occurs in the following phases: numbness; yearning, searching, and anger; disorganization and despair; and, finally, reorganization.[5] From this perspective, these phases echo the earlier separation of the infant from the mother, and the individual's ability to move through these phases of mourning is directly linked to the successes and failures of this first and most formative experience of loss. In yet another reformulation of the mourning process, which attempts to break away from the linearity implied by these earlier models, other theorists claim that the experience of mourning involves a constant oscillation between the poles of passivity and aggression, action and inaction (Stroebe and Schut, 1999).[6]

In recent years, scholars of "death studies" and theorists of grief and mourning have tended to stress the importance of a pluralistic understanding of mourning as various and functioning in different ways for each individual (Neimeyer, 2011; Walter, 1994, 1999). This approach emphasizes the actual experiences and responses of people to grief and mourning, rather than applying or verifying preconceived frameworks about the stages of grief and how people should respond (Klass et al., 1996: xix). Instead of conceptualizing mourning as a distinct, progressive process with a beginning and an endpoint that signals healing and a return to normalcy, this perspective calls attention to the importance of the continuation of bonds between the mourner and the deceased. This open-ended approach is perhaps more in line with the way grief and mourning have often been experienced on a daily, lived basis, giving clinical acceptance to lingering attachments to the deceased person, which had been previously pathologized and suppressed by theorists. Central to the continued presence of the dead in the life of the bereaved is the incorporation or reintegration of the deceased into

the narrative of the mourner's life. The deceased is a present absence that entails a transformed relational status to the living, rather than a severance and replacement, as previous Freudian and related theories have proposed.[7] The emphasis upon the presence of absent loved ones and a continuing connection between the living and the deceased is apparent in vernacular beliefs and practices cross-culturally, frequently expressed in material and visual cultures—for example, the pervasive phenomenon of artistic images and photographs that not only portray the dead but enable ongoing relations between human beings, deceased loved ones, and the divine (Christian, 2011; Wojcik 2009).

The expression of continuing bonds between the living and dead is certainly evident in the creative activity of numerous artists, whether self-taught, folk, or formally trained. Ora Knowell's quilt-making was an act of creativity and self-therapy, but it also served to weave the memories of her two sons into the narrative fabric of her life, keeping her connection to her children alive in an expression of her continued care and love for them. Similarly, a number of Tressa Prisbrey's accretive constructions reflected her ongoing connection and care for her children, while Madge Gill's drawings and the works of other Spiritualists were explicit expressions of enduring relationships between the living and the departed. More recently, in Brownsville, Tennessee, Billy Tripp has constructed an entire environment that he refers to as "The Mindfield Cemetery," which memorializes and gives presence to the deceased. Tripp (born 1955) began building his Mindfield in 1989, and it has evolved over the years into a twelve-story welded sculpture that is both a personal diary and a memorial to his mother and father. Although he told me that he initially began creating his massive structures as "a private conversation with myself" and as a way to externalize and clarify his thoughts, he later added new structures to commemorate his parents, painted others in their memory, and gave some of his previous sculptures new memorial meanings.[8] Tripp's Mindfield is roughly the size of a football field and over one hundred and twenty feet in height, a fusion of girders, towers, bridge trusses, scrap metal, and other salvaged items, including a large water tank, a fire tower, a suspended bathtub, a metal canoe, and other objects, some of which kinetically sway in the wind. Much of the sculpture is painted battleship gray, a color that Tripp says symbolizes the afterlife. Attached to his structures are steel cut-outs of hands and feet, skull-and-crossbones, heart shapes, hanging signs, shapes of

figures, and found items that catch his interest. The area surrounding the base of structures is decorated with pink flamingos, painted tree stumps, the American flag, repurposed dolls, and signs with humorous slogans or statements proclaiming his support for tolerance and freedom of expression. Free copies of Tripp's self-published, 725-page semi-autobiographical stream-of-consciousness book, *The Mindfield Years: Volume 1* (1996), are sometimes available in containers at the site.[9]

Billy Tripp's Mindfield at night, with the site's full name, "The Mindfield Cemetery" painted on the hood of a truck, honoring the memory of his mother and father, Brownsville, Tennessee. Photograph 2011, Fred Scruton.

Billy Tripp and the Harley Davidson motorcycle he decorated during a period of mourning after his father's death, with the Mindfield Cemetery structures visible in the background. Photograph 2008, Fred Scruton.

Tripp refers to the highest tower in the Mindfield as his father's symbolic grave marker, and the words "MY DAD," and "2002," the year of his father's death, are displayed in silhouettes of steel beneath the pinnacle of the spire. Just below, cut-outs of three sets of hands representing Tripp and his two brothers, and a heart symbolizing his mother, are marked in metal, above which are the words, "O, TAKE THESE OF US WITH THEE." With the entire family united with his father in this way, Tripp's bond with his deceased parents is overtly expressed, and his parents' lives are also commemorated through the various inscriptions emblazoned on his structures, such as, "The MINDFIELD CEMETERY—'a life of one'—In Honor of MOM + DAD," painted in large letters and bright colors on a recycled hood from a vehicle and upon the large water tower that he added to his structures after his father's death. During a period of mourning, Tripp salvaged an empty water tower from an abandoned factory in Kentucky, which he dismantled and transported back to Brownsville. He gradually

reassembled it on his property and then painted it to honor his parents, a process that helped him address his own grief.[10]

Kevin Sampson with his sculptures in his studio/living space, Newark, New Jersey. Photograph 2008, Ted Degener.

During this same difficult period, Tripp covered his Harley-Davidson motorcycle with hundreds of found objects, transforming it into a mobile assemblage that evoked memories of his parents and commemorated their lives. He connected his life to theirs through the use of personal items and photographs prominently placed amid the plethora of plastic flowers, Barbie dolls, pipe cleaners, chains, old toys, slogans, images of heroes, and a miscellany of other things. On the front of the bike, beneath a black and white photo of his parents, Tripp's laminated dedication reads, "For my Father, for the sweet memory of my Mother, and for the union he says they successfully had, which, a part of, created and nurtured me . . . in the daily

acts of: simply being themselves." The bike was created without a specific plan, much like the Mindfield, as a way to materialize ideas and commemorate past events. "I was wanting to talk to myself, have a little conversation and decorate it in a way that spoke to me. . . . I had my dad's wedding ring, had a picture of my dad sick in the hospital, had a picture of my dad and momma together in the peak of their marriage. I had my teething ring, . . . so I had birth and marriage and life and death. . . . [Decorating it] helped me, it gave me something to do, until I otherwise came to terms with my dad's death."[11]

The use of such personal items and representations of loved ones not only externalizes emotions and memories in potentially therapeutic ways, but also incorporates the deceased into the narrative of one's everyday life, a manifestation of continued presence through the creative construction of things imbued with memory and history. As Tripp observes, the continuing narrative in tangible form that he explores through his sculptures help materialize his thoughts; but the objects also "talk back to him" in an ongoing conversation, a physical representation that offers clarification, reflection, connection, and inspiration.[12] Although Tripp's conversation began as private project constructed in steel and found objects, the ensuing commemoration of his parents now fused throughout the Mind-field and painted in bold letters for all to see has become part of the local landscape, a vernacular architectural memorial that towers over Brownsville, "In honor of: MOM and DAD." Ultimately, the Mindfield will be a memorial to Tripp's life as well, as a monument to his remarkable sculptural accomplishments and his own burial place, as he plans to be interred there upon his death.

Kevin Blythe Sampson (born 1954) has created dozens of sculptures to memorialize those who have died, although he began making art as a way to cope with his own grief after a series of family tragedies. Sampson, who taught himself how to draw, worked for the police force in Scotch Plains, New Jersey, for eighteen years, the last ten as a composite sketch artist, creating images to help identify criminal suspects. In the late 1980s, his wife Pamela was diagnosed with a terminal illness and their son, Kyle, was born prematurely and died. "After that happened, I changed," he recalls. "I lost my son and my wife was sick, and there was nothing I could do about it. Then my close cousin died. I grabbed a log from the woodpile and began carving, I needed to make something. I carved a figure. . . . Around the same

time, AIDs and crack cocaine hit hard in Newark, and so many people I knew were dying. I started making altars for them. With all that loss, I had to create."[13] Sampson's first altar was made for his favorite cousin, Carroll Phyllis Oliver, who died three months after his own son had passed away. During her illness, she became involved in the religion of Santeria in hopes of a cure, and after her death, her mother gave Sampson the items from her altars. He then incorporated these into his sculpture. "I carved a figure of her and used her Santeria objects in the altar. I created a boat with her sitting in it, to help ease her journey into the next life. . . . My intention was not just to create a memorial, but to be involved in her transition to the afterlife. . . . I knew that even death couldn't separate us for ever. That piece I did formed a bond with her death, looking at it as not such a horrible thing but as a natural transition. So I chanted when I made that sculpture, I prayed and I called up things."[14]

Sampson's initial memorial assemblages were constructed from found objects and the possessions of the deceased, such as necklaces, figurines, hair, tile, jewelry, and string, as well as pork-rib bones, chili peppers, yarn, piano keys, beads, and an array of other items. He arranged these recycled and personal objects into ornate and colorful assemblages, cementing them together and repeatedly painting over some items, thickly lacquering and shaping the overall sculptures into forms such jewelry boxes, ships, houses, bottles, abstract pieces, and traditional altar-like constructions. When I asked him about the process of creating these early altars and the objects he used, he explained that they were made for best friends and relatives, as well as people he barely knew. "I got obsessed with it and got pretty crazy with some of it, with people dying left and right. I was using all sorts of things—chicken feet, bones, hair, pigs' ears, whatever, all infused with power. . . . I used things that had been alive such as bones, hair and the like because when I first started I believed that these were objects of power. I was trying to make magic in the beginning, not art. The art came later, as I healed and as my need for magic became much more tangible. . . . I used objects that belonged to the dead because by them touching these things, or loving them, or hating these objects, I believe that the dead left remnants of these feelings and emotions behind. Much like a ghost."[15]

Sampson's memorial altars, haunted and enlivened by these personal objects, infused with memories, life experiences, and the sensorial power of touch, give continued presence and honor to the dead, who are made

manifest and given new life through sympathetically magical acts of compassion and creativity. His altars create order out of the emotional chaos that death brings, celebrating the lives of the deceased in ways that have been therapeutic for the bereaved as well as for Sampson himself. These early shrine-like sculptures often were given to the relatives of the deceased, where they were displayed in homes. In some cases Sampson has kept the work, such as the sculpture he made to guide his cousin Carroll into the next life, and who he says continues to guide and watch over him in return.[16] Like spontaneous shrines and street-side memorials, Sampson's sculptures serve the emotional needs of grief and connect the living and the dead in tangible ways. Yet unlike the often transitory memorials created in public spaces, Sampson's works are fixed in form and usually not public displays. They are transportable reliquaries that may be moved from home to home among relatives as objects of commemoration and tribute. For example, in his sculpture *Mother Oatman* (2000), Sampson honors Avada Oatman, a respected family friend who also was his best friend's grandmother and an admired elder in the church where Sampson sang in the choir. "The people in the church believed that she had healing hands and could use her powers to heal you through prayer. When she died I created a piece to immortalize this great southern woman."[17] Sampson constructed the horseshoe-shaped top portion of this regal-looking altar from chair arms, which arc elegantly around an elevated and bejeweled reliquary or shrine-like sanctum, decorated with beads, shells, and other colorful objects, in a tribute that evokes Mother Oatman's grace, holiness, and stature within the community.

Kevin Sampson, *Mother Oatman*, 2000. Mixed media, 26 x 23 x 9 ½ in. (66 x 58.4 x 24.1 cm). Collection American Folk Art Museum, New York; gift of Jacqueline Loewe Fowler (2000.7.2). Photograph Gavin Ashworth.

Sampson considers his sculptures to be spiritual objects that connect to God, and he says that he still secretly prays and chants when he makes them, explaining that his entire house now has been transformed into an altar-like sacred space, his personal "conduit to God."[18] He views his work in the African tradition of the griot, a healer and storyteller who serves a community. "In the beginning I was looking for ways to heal myself, to heal my family and then later to heal my community. . . . Let me let you in on one of my secrets. I still don't view my sculptures as art. That is why when they are done I don't get satisfaction out of showing them, it's all about the

process . . . and attaching self to other worlds when I make them."[19] In his efforts to rescue and preserve the memories of the dead, Sampson now functions as a spiritual intercessor in his neighborhood, caring for the deceased and their safe passage to the afterlife, and sustaining their identities and connection to the community. Sampson's friend, gallery owner and writer Randall Morris, situates Sampson's assemblages in the tradition of the African American "spirit yards" of the South, distilled into a miniaturized form, and describes them as "amuletic, connected with culture and personal history . . . with all the glory, fire, mystery and history, medicine, healing and memory of a yard show" (quoted in Cox, 2002).

Despite the cultural influences that infuse his work, Sampson continues to be categorized as an outsider artist on occasion. When I asked him about the outsider-art label, he laughed at the notion and then responded with a serious critique. "I have never been an outsider artist. It is a racist term that can't apply to an African American in the first place. It's a marketing term that a group of collectors promoted. . . . I am an African American and my work should be viewed in the context of its history. I hate the term, it is offensive, disconnected, and elitist."[20] Sampson's sculptures reflect his African heritage and aspects of African American experience, while also expressing ideas associated with yard displays in the South that emphasize honoring family heritage, protection and safe-keeping, individual skill, and improving one's community.[21] These southern traditions have been transformed in urban areas, as he explains: "I don't live in the South, I don't have the space, so what we've done in the cities is we've taken these yard shows and we've brought them inside. These are shrines, memorials."[22]

Kevin Sampson, *Uncle Bob*, 2006. Mixed media, 44 x 47 x 19 in. (111.8 x 119.4 x 48.3 cm). Courtesy Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York.

In addition to his memorial pieces, Sampson has created a range of other found-object sculptures, as well as drawings, paintings, and airbrushed pieces that convey his views on politics, religion, popular culture, and African American history and cultural experiences. Many of these works also reflect local concerns and his commitment to them. "I believe that I have a responsibility to represent my community and to give a voice to the voiceless, and by doing so I help to heal my community by addressing its concerns and problems and getting them heard."[23] His sculptures have dealt with issues of injustice and racism; the terrorist attacks of September 11,

2001; Wall Street corruption; the abusive treatment of both African American and Chinese laborers; the internment of Japanese citizens during World War II; dogmatic patriotism; anxieties about presidential elections; and the suffering of the homeless and the poor, among other things. The critical political and social commentary expressed in these works is a direct outgrowth of his upbringing. Raised in a household that was committed to civil rights and political activism, Sampson recalls how his father, a barber, community leader, and activist, would meet with civil rights leaders in his barbershop and in the family kitchen in the 1960s and 1970s, where rights marches and demonstrations were organized, and where young Sampson met individuals such Malcolm X, Shirley Chisholm, Ruby Dee, Dick Gregory, William Kunsler, and Robert Farris Thompson. In a sculpture entitled *Barbershop*, Sampson commemorates his father's workplace as a local center for community activism, using objects his father had given him after a visit to his hometown in Georgia: remnants of his dilapidated, boyhood home, souvenirs from a fishing trip, and even pork-rib bones from meals he had eaten on the trip and saved for his son's art.[24] After his father's death in 2005, Sampson created an altar entitled *Uncle Bob* (his father's nickname among family members), which incorporated a pipe his father smoked, a broken African sculpture that he owned, as well as beads, wire, and other found objects sculpted into a vessel to ease the journey into the next life.[25]

Through his art, Sampson has become a community leader engaged in the issues that concern those in his Ironbound neighborhood, while also mentoring young local artists, teaching art classes at the Ironbound Community Center, and supervising four collaborative murals for the City of Newark's "City Mural Program." His neighbors support his art projects, in part because of their diverse ethnic backgrounds, according to Sampson; they stop by to visit and talk, encourage him and bring him materials to use in his work, and their contributions are an important part of his creative process. In summing up the role of art making in his life, Sampson asserts that "art for me personally is healing—I used art initially to heal myself and now it has become a way to express myself, to express political concerns and issues in my community. . . . I don't think that the therapy aspects of art are confined to the self-taught art field. I believe that all art is healing. It allows the mind to focus on some thing other than self. That in itself is therapeutic."[26]

Kevin Sampson's sculptures, Billy Tripp's Mindfield, Tressa Prisbrey's Bottle Village, and the work of numerous other individuals who have created things in response to feelings of grief or as acts of memorialization bear a resemblance to the vernacular memorials constructed by individuals after tragic death—the assemblages of hand-written letters, photographs, flowers, candles, stuffed animals, and other personal objects that are placed at the sites of traumatic death. Such memorial constructions are created through the processes of assemblage and bricolage in an active response to grief and in the attempt to emotionally grasp the trauma of death, to mourn, to memorialize, and to establish a link between the living and the deceased. At such sites, whether roadside shrines, the memorials created in response to the attacks of September 11, or the white ghost bikes that increasingly mark the locations where cyclists have been killed, the ritualized use of objects, as well as the ritualized actions that occur, similarly help manage the difficult task of mourning (Santino, 2001, 2006a; Margry and Sánchez-Carretero, 2011; Wojcik, 2008). The expressive practices that take place at these memorial sites, like the creative efforts of self-taught artists experiencing grief, provide personally meaningful ways of expressing sorrow and remembrance, offering an alternative to institutional mourning rituals, which for some are inadequate, depersonalized, and fail to fulfill the emotional needs of the bereaved. These vernacular memorial practices also materialize the desire for change and transformation, both personal and social, speaking to the need to *do something* with the turbulent energies aroused by experiences of tragedy and suffering in a way that engages and communicates with others (Santino, 2006b: 10–14; Santino, 2011; Margry and Sánchez-Carretero, 2011: 28–31). For instance, Prisbrey's ongoing construction of Bottle Village provided a focused creative outlet in which she could channel unresolved emotions from her difficult past and her lingering grief for her children—for whom sections of the village were created as vernacular hospice spaces—into a transformative material construction through which she could reach out to others.

Taya Doro Mitchell in her home in Oakland, California. Photograph 2009, Jo Farb Hernández, courtesy of SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments.

Much like Prisbrey's use of recycled materials and found objects to construct her "rose room" for her dying daughter, Taya Doro Mitchell (born 1934 in the Netherlands) transformed her house in Oakland, California, into a hospice space and work of art. She adorned the interior of her home with thousands of wooden beads, mirrors, craft items, and various other found materials as she cared for her dying husband, who had Alzheimer's disease. She initially started her project in the aftermath of the Loma Prieta earthquake that struck the San Francisco Bay Area in October of 1989. She began to cover the cracks in the walls caused by the earthquake, putting

mirrors up, then making ornamental frames for the mirrors, and eventually deciding to embed the walls and ceiling with decorative objects, the effect of which she says made her feel as if she were standing inside a box of jewels (Hernández, 2010: 40–43; Whittaker, 2008).

Mitchell's husband was ill for years. During that time she decorated her house with hundreds of thousands of objects, meticulously placing them in intricately detailed and symmetrical configurations. Her mesmerizing and mosaic-like designs consist of colorful assemblages of beads, bottle tops, buttons, earrings, glass, ratchet-tabs, pieces of plastic, and other knickknacks she gathered at thrift stores (Hernández, 2010: 43). Like Rodia, Chand, Prisbrey, and other self-taught environment builders, Mitchell did not begin her work with a grand compositional plan in mind. Her project evolved spontaneously and accretively as a personal act of self-therapy as she took care of her husband. "I don't think I ever made the conscious decision to do all this, but at a certain point I needed to do something while I could watch him at the same time. . . . It helped me work through those years of his having Alzheimer's and suffering, actually. Whenever anyone asks me why I'm making art, I say, I want to stay sane! . . . I would sit there and move my hands! Just move my hands sitting at the table, rolling things up, stapling them together, painting" (quoted in Whittaker, 2008). Her work not only put her in a "peaceful frame of mind," but she says that it had a calming effect on her husband as well. Although he was unable to express himself during the last months of his life, he was aware of the artistically transformed space around him. Mitchell recalls that at one point he had a moment of clarity, and the last coherent thing he said to her before he died was "You really made this place beautiful" (quoted in Whittaker, 2008). While her work seemed to ease the suffering of her husband, it obviously helped with her emotional pain as well. As previous examples make clear, in the face of the fragmenting effects of grief and death, the systematic assembling of objects in patterned and aesthetically pleasing ways may provide a renewed sense of order and a rebuilding of the self that is emotionally healing. The creative process provides structure in the midst of the shattering feelings of emptiness and sorrow, filling the void caused by grief and helping to restore a sense of wholeness and meaning.

Taya Doro Mitchell's decorated guest bedroom. Photograph 2009, Jo Farb Hernández, courtesy of SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments.

Taya Doro Mitchell's living room ceiling with circular, mandala-like pattern. Photograph 2009, Jo Farb Hernández, courtesy of SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments.

Taya Doro Mitchell, living room wall detail. Photograph 2009, Jo Farb Hernández, courtesy of SPACES—Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments.

Emery Blagdon with his healing machines and a stack of circuit board paintings inside the shed on his farm, Garfield Table, Nebraska. Photograph 1979, Sally and Richard Greenhill.

Emery Blagdon's healing machines in his shed, Garfield Table, Nebraska. Photograph 1979, Sally and Richard Greenhill.

Like Taya Doro Mitchell, the life and works of Emery Blagdon (1907–1986) illustrate the connection between feelings of loss and the attempt to create a personal space that protects and heals the self. Blagdon, who lived alone on his farm in the Sand Hills of west-central Nebraska, created over six hundred wire and wood sculptures and eighty circuit-like paintings in his barn. Having seen both of his parents and three of his younger siblings die of cancer, he built his "healing machine" in an attempt to prevent disease, protect himself, and alleviate physical ailments and suffering among others. His visually spectacular constructions resemble shrines, towers, chandeliers, and cages, and consist of intricate configurations of wire, scrap metal, wood, minerals, glass, found objects, and assorted debris. He believed that when his creations were arranged in different configurations and fueled by different minerals, they were charged with static energy and emitted electrical activity and auras with healing powers (Umberger, 2007: 203–223). Blagdon's crowded shed of shimmering healing devices provided a

sense of enclosure and protection, a sanctuary from the looming threat of death and suffering.

Although often labeled an outsider artist, Blagdon was not entirely disconnected from culture or isolated from his community. For instance, his ideas for his sculptures and other designs seem related to his years of experience as a hobo and his familiarity with tramp art created from recycled objects. Furthermore, he provided therapy to local people in his eight-hundred-square-foot shed, and a number of them claimed relief from various ailments after these treatments. While some neighbors went to Blagdon for cures, others simply liked spending time in his shed with him and his sculptures. Like Prisbrey and others dealing with the death of loved ones, Blagdon's feelings of loss and fear of death were eased by social interaction with community members, many of whom were impressed with the design of his devices. Drawing upon his personal experiences, skills, and the traditions with which he was familiar, Blagdon created these objects of folk healing in response to life circumstances, with intended therapeutic benefits for himself and those in his community.

Emery Blagdon, Healing Machine (untitled individual component), c. 1955–1986. Metal, wood, and mixed media, 31 ¼ x 30 ½ x 38 in. (79.3 x 77.4 x 96.5 cm). John Michael Kohler Arts Center Collection.

Trauma, Flow, and the Artistic Process

Creative activities often help construct order out of chaos, and as various artists have observed, much of the therapeutic benefit of art making lies in this process of ordering, controlling, and externalizing painful experiences and emotions. The creative process itself also may invoke psychological states that have latent therapeutic aspects. Many artists are familiar with the experience of complete immersion in artistic activity that appears almost trance-like and involves a sense of "flow," an absolute engagement in creative endeavor that is stimulating, intrinsically rewarding, and sometimes transformative. The potentially therapeutic and transformative features of art

making are illustrated by the art and life of Ionel Talpazan (born 1955), a refugee from Romania living in New York City. Talpazan has created more than one thousand paintings, drawings, and sculptures inspired by his ideas about flying saucers and life in outer space.

Ionel Talpazan, *UFO: Art & Science Theory Fundamentale, Dedicat for Peace*, 1999. Oil crayon, poster paint, metallic paint, pencil, and ink on paper, 30 x 63 in. (76.2 x 160 cm). Collection Jack Stevens. Courtesy Henry Boxer Gallery.

I first met Talpazan in 1999, after acquaintances in New York told me about a man who sold fascinating pictures of flying saucers on the streets of lower Manhattan. When I contacted him, he invited me to visit his small studio apartment, which was overflowing with images of UFOs. There were large, brightly colored canvases, caked with paint and covered with flying saucers, some in lush colors, others in silver or gold, landing or taking off, flying over barren landscapes beneath exploding stars or hovering serenely over the New York skyline. Diagrams of multicolored spaceships were pinned to the walls, some of which resembled stained glass and appeared to glow from within. There were also larger diagrams, five feet wide and covered with indecipherable writing that revealed the inner workings of UFOs. Scattered around the room were smaller drawings and painted sculptures of flying saucers that were carved in detail and mounted on pedestals. There was a single bed in one corner with an American flag above it, and a small table cluttered with pens, felt markers, paints, and cigarette

butts. In the center of the apartment was an enormous object, perhaps seven feet in diameter—a plaster spaceship under construction that must have weighed nearly one ton. Talpazan had rigged the craft with strings of flashing Christmas lights and when he switched them on the room pulsated and swirled with UFO iconography and images of the cosmos. His art had grown to take up the entire space; there was hardly any room to move about. Nothing else existed here, only flying saucers.

Ionel Talpazan, *Future UFOs Diverse Diagrame: 22 Modele Advanced Exstra Terestriale Tecnologÿ for Planeta Earth*, 2000. Oil crayon, marker, pencil, and ink on paper, 30 x 40 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm). Photograph James Wojcik.

Talpazan had created a complete UFO environment in his tiny apartment and he was eager to show me his art, explaining each piece with enthusiasm. He said that he had "sacrificed his life to the UFO" and that his ultimate goal was to reveal the unknown technologies and hidden meanings of flying saucers with the hope of helping humanity. As the evening wore on, he told

me his life story, recounting the details and hardships of his past with great emotion. At one point he paused and looked at me directly, with a melancholy expression, and said, “There are people who make me look crazy, they create stories, they lie about me. People think I’m crazy, but people do not have the right to make me look crazy.”[27] His concern about being misunderstood and labeled insane became a recurring theme throughout the evening and in my subsequent conversations with him. He was especially disturbed by being labeled an outsider artist and clearly understood the connotations of term: weird, crazy, psychotic. Over the course of our conversations, Talpazan discussed other issues as well, especially ideas about escape and freedom, suffering, alienation, and cosmic mystery as these relate to his life experiences and views about flying saucers.

Ionel Talpazan working on his large flying saucer sculpture in his one-room apartment, New York City, 1999. Photograph Daniel Wojcik.

Talpazan was born Ionel Pârvu in Romania on August 16, 1955, in the village of Petrăchioaia, about twenty-five kilometers northeast of Bucharest.

He was born a twin, and premature. His twin brother died a few days after birth, and like others who have lost a twin sibling, Talpazan wonders why he survived. “I should have died too, it was miracle I lived. Sometimes I wish I died. . . . Why was I born? Maybe better not to be born.”[28] Talpazan’s parents were not married, and because of conflicts between them he was sent away to be raised by his father’s parents. At the age of six they gave him up for adoption, and he was raised by foster parents, Gheorghe Talpazan and Dumitra Roşescu in a nearby village. As he talked about this part of childhood, he began to weep and then became angry. His foster mother was violent, drank heavily, and used to beat Ionel regularly; he says that she once killed a woman with a shovel in a fight.

One day during the summer of 1963, when Talpazan was seven years old, his foster mother beat him for accidently losing a farm tool. He ran away, hiding in a ditch beneath a metal grate in a field throughout the night. There was a downpour of rain, and he huddled there shivering and afraid. The rain stopped, and he suddenly saw an enormous blue light overhead, a glowing, spinning, blue beam that surrounded him. He watched this light in amazement and fear for a long time. Recalling this event, he says, “I look and look at this light, it was blue energy that covered me, it was like from another world. The light was a beautiful color and moved in circles. There was no noise. It was very strange. I see things I never see before. . . . This was not a dream.”[29] Talpazan did not understand the experience at the time, but he later came to believe that the blue light he witnessed may have been from a UFO. This incident completely altered him, and he related subsequent events, his aspirations, and his life’s purpose to that experience: “That blue energy, it gave me some kind of dream in life, some kind of vision. It gave me ideas, it opened up my mind into the domain of the UFOs.”[30] A few years after this experience, he became fascinated with the popular lore about flying saucers, and at the age of twelve he began to draw them obsessively and made hundreds of drawings.

Ionel Talpazan with his painting *Father and Son in Space*, 1992. Photograph 1999, Daniel Wojcik.

Living in Romania under the oppressive government of Nicolae Ceauşescu, Talpazan became increasingly despondent with the situation in his country and planned to escape. After several attempts, he finally succeeded in March 1987, when he and a friend swam across the Danube River to Yugoslavia during the night, nearly drowning in the process. Imprisoned as an illegal immigrant, he was then sent to a United Nations refugee camp near Belgrade, and seven months later he was recognized as a political refugee and allowed to emigrate to the United States. In New York, he worked at various manual labor jobs to survive, with little time or

inclination to draw. After several years, he gradually began to sketch again and then to paint flying saucers, experimenting with a wide range of styles, techniques, and new mediums. Much of his early work depicts the New York City skyline and New York landmarks with UFOs hovering above them, or shows scenes of outer space and the energies of the cosmos in an expressionistic style, his canvases thickly textured with rich pigments that he applied with his fingers. Other works are characterized by a sense of dizzying movement, such as his *Father and Son in Space* (1992), with blasts of light, spinning disks, spiraling galaxies, and a depiction of a father and son together gazing into the mysteries of the universe, an image of the childhood Talpazan never had.

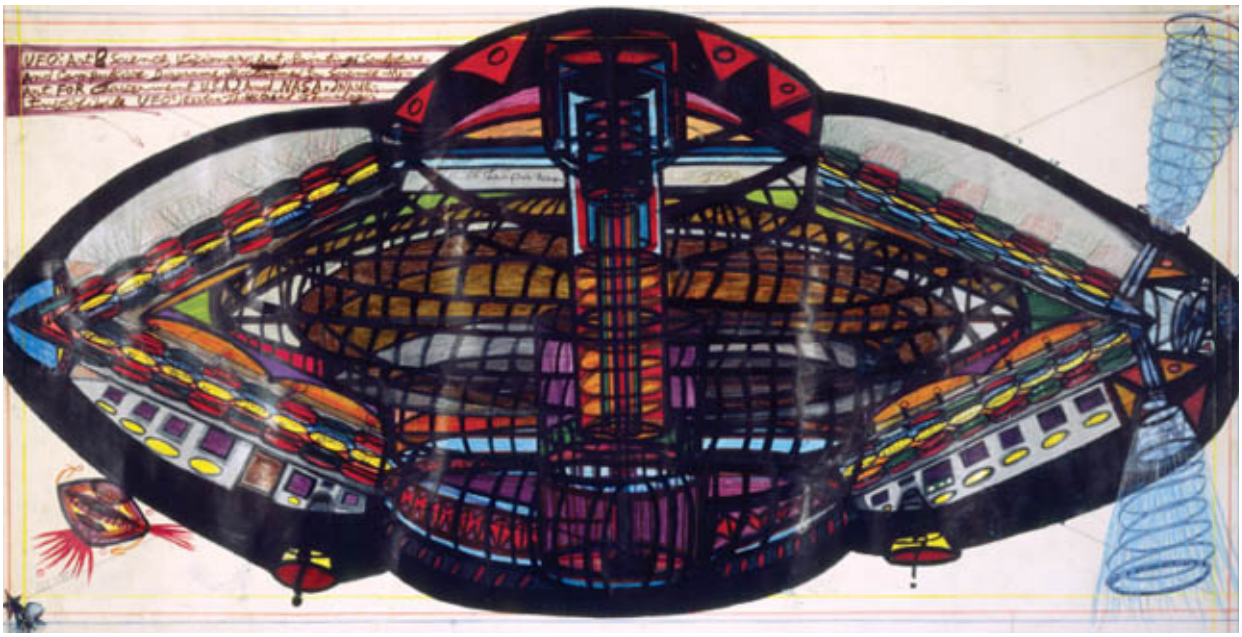
Ionel Talpazan explains the systems of propulsion depicted in one of his flying saucer diagrams. Photograph 2003, James Wojcik.

His more recent work includes large diagrams of cross-sections of UFOs, visionary blueprints that reveal the details of flying saucer technology, with his theories about their systems of propulsion sometimes written on them. To illustrate his ideas, he has devised a color-coded system that delineates the energy sources of flying saucers, such as nuclear, anti-gravitational,

magnetic, antimagnetic, and electro-magnetic systems, as well as volcanic power, metallurgical, solar, gas, "vacuum technologies," and what he calls "free energy." For these precise technical drawings, often simply entitled *UFO: Art and Science*, he combines crayon, ink, pencil, magic marker, watercolor, and oil pastel to create illuminated, mandala-like flying machines that radiate halos of energy or vibrate with hallucinatory intensity. With their meticulous details, clarity of form, and Talpazan's absolute devotion to them, these diagrams convey a genuine believability.

On some of the pieces in which Talpazan writes his thoughts and theories the words completely surround the image, crowding every inch of the surface in unrestrained communication, almost like automatic writing. His ideas are written in a hybrid of Romanian and English (spelled phonetically). He considers the words to be as important as the images, explaining that although his work has an artistic dimension, it is a combination of art and science, and may have scientific value in the future, as physicists and engineers decipher his notions. A few of these drawings contain esoteric codes ("Kod Astronomic") that have hidden technological and mystical meanings. His ultimate dream is to share his visions and theories with NASA scientists and government officials in order to explore and develop UFO technologies: "I dedicate my art for science, and for peace. That's why I'm here on Planet Earth, that's why I'm in America."[31]

Talpazan equates the technology of flying saucers with cosmic laws and some sort of universal spirituality. As he says, "My art shows spiritual technology, something beautiful and beyond human imagination, that comes from another galaxy. Something superior in intelligence and technology. So, in a relative way, this is like the God, it is perfect."[32] He hopes that his theories and illustrations of flying saucer technologies can be used for peaceful purposes, to save the environment, avert nuclear disaster, and help create a better world.



Ionel Talpazan, *UFO*, 1999. Poster paint, pencil, oil crayon and ink on paper, 30 x 61 in. (76.2 x 155 cm). Courtesy Henry Boxer Gallery.

Talpazan has encountered an inordinate amount of emotional trauma and hardship in his life, struggling to survive as a refugee in New York City, living on the verge of poverty, barely able to pay his rent and bills. He has been homeless twice, selling his art on the street during the day and then at night sleeping in a box near Columbus Circle. Although his art is included in several major museum collections and has been featured in galleries and publications, he is pessimistic about the future. He mistrusts galleries and those interested in selling his work on consignment, preferring to deal directly with potential buyers, and is known for displaying his art "on sale" each year outside the annual Outsider Art Fair in Manhattan, while the art dealers inside attempt to sell his work at gallery prices.

On numerous occasions he has been completely despondent, and described his situation to me: "I suffer for many years like this. I live poor, and I survive day by day. It's a terrible life. What am I gonna do? I don't know what's gonna happen to me tomorrow. . . . I have nothing, no money, no insurance. If I get sick or cannot pay rent, I go back on the street. What did I do to deserve this life? What kind of God watches over me? What is wrong with me? I live an honest life and I have nothing. . . . I am alone, no family, nobody to help me. . . . I have my art, that's all. My life is like a bomb, atomic—it can explode, any time."[33] A few minutes after this

emotional outpouring, Talpazan began talking about his art. He told me he was working on a new series of UFO sculptures and a special drawing that illustrates the unknown energy sources that might propel spaceships. As he spoke, his mood changed, his face brightened, and suddenly he became animated and upbeat.

Talpazan's reasons for making art are complex, but like various other individuals discussed in this book, the artistic process has helped him deal with difficulties and crises in his life. His art has sustained him emotionally and psychologically, and he says it frees him from his current burdens of poverty and despair. "I go into my mind thinking about the UFOs; this is my escape from problems. I find my personal freedom through my drawings. . . . I go into a different dimension, to forget my life."[34] While his art may provide a creative sanctuary, it also has become the basis of his identity and a source of self-worth, as he proudly speaks about exhibits of his work and shares magazine clippings about his art. Although he has trouble reading and writing in English, artistic expression has given him a voice and a way to transcend the difficulties of language and the adversities of his life to some degree. With his lack of formal education, Talpazan is especially sensitive about being seen as a stupid immigrant and a crazy outsider. Through his art and related theories he reveals himself as a thoughtful and inventive individual who contemplates the mysteries of the universe and issues of ultimate concern. "My art is about the big mystery in life. How did we get here on planet Earth? Why are we here? Is there life on other planets?"

The ideas of cosmic wonder, escape, freedom, and being "from elsewhere" are central themes in Talpazan's life, and the global icon of the UFO symbolizes these notions. As numerous theorists have demonstrated, the popular lore and vernacular beliefs about flying saucers are essentially a religious phenomenon, an update of earlier ideas about a divine mediator, a syncretism of new gods and superhuman technology, offering escape and salvation.[35] Carl Jung, in his landmark study, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, argued that the circular shape of the flying saucer resembles the archetype of the mandala found in mythology, folklore, dreams, and iconography throughout the world. "Mandala" is an ancient Sanskrit term meaning "circle." Found in the sacred art of various spiritual traditions, mandalas are often used as a means of focusing attention, inducing trance states, and creating sacred space. Tibetan Buddhist and

Hindu traditions, for example, have used mandalas for thousands of years as an aid in meditation and spiritual transformation, while Navajo sand painters employ them in healing ceremonies. Jung regarded the mandala as an expression of the self, of wholeness, and of God. He observed that during times of personal trauma, fragmentation, or societal crisis, mandalas are often visualized and created by people yearning for harmony, stability, and psychic equilibrium. "Mandalas, as we know, usually appear in situations of psychic confusion and perplexity. The archetype thereby constellated represents a pattern of order, which, like a psychological 'view-finder' marked with a cross, or a circle divided into four, is superimposed on the weltering confusion held together by the protective circle. . . . Psychologically, the rotundum or mandala is a symbol of self. The self is the archetype of order par excellence" (1978: 117–118).[36]

As a primary symbolic form, the mandala has particular therapeutic value for individuals in unruly mental states, according to Jung. By creating mandalas, Jung asserted that his patients were able to make the unconscious mind conscious and take a step towards psychological order and wholeness. To illustrate his theories, Jung actually acquired some of Adolf Wölfli's geometrically ordered drawings that contained mandala symbolism, such as the piece *Medical Faculty* (1905). Mandala-like shapes and repetitive patterns characterize the art of numerous self-taught and visionary artists, including Martin Ramírez, Eugene Andolsek, Paul Laffoley, Charles Dellschau, and Marc Lamy. Andolsek (1921–2008), for example, began creating mesmerizing mandala-like drawings in response to feelings of extreme anxiety and self-doubt related to his new job as a stenographer for the Rock Island Railroad in 1953. After his first day of work, he began doodling, and continued this activity for several hours, forgetting his worries in the process. Realizing that the act of drawing alleviated his ongoing fears and job-related despair, he began to spend his evenings after work sitting at his kitchen table immersed in the trancelike process of creating precisely patterned circular and geometric shapes, which had a calming effect and produced a sense of well-being (Patterson, 2010: 25). Andolsek continued this self-therapeutic endeavor for more than fifty years, producing several thousand complex and hypnotically absorbing designs that resemble kaleidoscopic mandalas and psychedelic stained glass windows. After completing his drawings, Andolsek had no further interest in them and he tossed the pieces into a closet or a trunk. He never displayed his work and

did not consider it art, compelled instead by the cathartic process of drawing and the freedom from troubles that it provided. It was only after he moved into an assisted living center that his work was discovered and later exhibited; upon receiving acclaim for his discarded compositions, the somewhat surprised Andolsek humbly suggested that the pieces might be best used as colorful placemats.

Eugene Andolsek, *Untitled* #14A, 1950–2003. India ink on graph paper, 16 x 21 in. (40.6 x 53.3 cm). Collection American Folk Art Museum, New York; gift of the artist (2005.18.3). Photograph Gavin Ashworth.

Ionel Talpazan works on his *Silver UFO* drawing throughout the night, with his dove Maria perched on his shoulder, February, 2000. Photograph Daniel Wojcik.

Although perhaps not as kaleidoscopically hypnotic as Andolsek's work, Talpazan's hundreds of flying saucer diagrams are similar in their precisely patterned design and color, balanced and symmetrical, with mesmerizing internal structures. His drawings are especially striking in their similarity to traditional mandalas; some works do not have a conventional flying saucer shape at all, but are circular and resemble the sun or the all-seeing eye of God. These intricately designed spherical forms and the aesthetically pleasing process of repeating such patterns may not only impose structure on

the chaos of the world and provide a sense of psychic wholeness, but also induce a calm and meditative state of consciousness.

One evening when I was visiting Talpazan, he resumed his work on a large, damaged piece that he called *Silver UFO*. As the evening wore on, I watched him retrace and repaint this mandala-shaped diagram throughout the night until about 5:30 AM, on his knees on the floor, working in serene silence, his face inches away from the design, with his white dove, Maria, perched on his shoulder, cooing quietly. Talpazan was not just drawing a spaceship; the process itself was a trance-like and therapeutic act, a suspension of time and space. Entirely immersed in the creative act, his image of a flying saucer transported him to another realm, free from the difficulties of his life.[37]

The concept of flow, as a mental state of totally focused and energized involvement in an activity that provides a sense of timelessness and feelings of fulfillment, was proposed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi after his observations in the 1960s of artists who became so engaged in the creative process that they would ignore their need for food, water and sleep, and lose their sense of time and of self. As Csikszentmihalyi describes it, flow is a "state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (1990: 4). The flow state involves more than total involvement in an activity; it also includes the feeling of control over one's actions and control over the final product. One's activities have a sense of purpose and meaning, and the activity is rewarding in and of itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990, 1988). Flow may be experienced in any number of activities—performing music, dancing, playing chess, rock-climbing, weaving, sports, ritual performances, art making, play activities—and in Csikszentmihalyi's view, people are most happy when they are in a state of flow. As he explains, in such a mental state, "The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost" (quoted in Geirland, 1996).

Many artists, professional and amateur, academically educated and self-taught alike, have commented upon a trance-like state that may be brought on by the creative process, generally viewing it as highly desirable. Painter and art critic Ann Wiens, who holds degrees in fine art from the Art Institute

of Chicago and the State University of New York, Stony Brook, observes, "Many artists I know have talked about something similar to a 'trance-like state' that occurs when we're working, although we don't necessarily refer to it in those terms. It's more often described as 'losing oneself,' or 'losing track of time,' or 'being in the flow.' That state of extraordinary concentration when hours pass without your noticing, when you forget to eat or you stay up all night, when you sort of 'wake up' later and this work appeared in front of you and you're not quite sure where it came from. It's a huge high; it's what drives many artists. I believe so-called 'outsider' artists are experiencing many of the same motivations and impulses as 'insider' artists, but they're being treated differently, as those observing them apply different criteria and vocabularies to their work."[38]

Flow-like states clearly are experienced by many academically trained and self-taught artists alike during the process of creativity, and in some cases, this total immersion in artistic activity may provide relief from painful memories and emotions, instilling a sense of tranquility or even personal transformation. The Japanese artist Hiroyuki Doi (born 1946), a chef by trade, says that he began drawing after his youngest brother died from a brain tumor. He embraced art making as a way to cope with his sorrow and insomnia during a time when he became "obsessed with thoughts about life and death. To ease these feelings I turned to art. I tried out lots of things, watercolour and oil painting, pastels and pencils. When I finally discovered circle drawing, I started to feel very relieved. Today, I simply enjoy drawing circles" (quoted in Doi et al., 2001: 253). Using fine point pens, Doi created hundreds, then thousands of circles on paper in beautifully intricate, mesmerizing, foamlike configurations that sometimes resemble mandalas in their complex circular formations. He explains that he does not begin his drawings with a specific composition in mind, but that the images emerge and evolve spontaneously as he works in a meditative or trance-like state. "By drawing, I started to feel calm. I started to feel that something other than myself allowed me to draw these works" (quoted in Gómez, 2010a: 12).

In addition to inducing tranquil and flow-like mental states, art making also allows for the expression of emotions and experiences that cannot be communicated in other ways. As discussed previously, traumatic experiences and personal struggles often are so painful that they cannot be put into words. For instance, in my interactions with Ionel Talpazan over the years, it has become apparent that he has extreme difficulty talking about his

childhood, and he sometimes becomes silent or openly weeps when he remembers it. Similarly, the Vietnam War veteran Michael Cousino was initially unable to speak about his horrifying experiences during the war, and Grandma Prisbrey seemed to have trouble verbally expressing feelings of grief and anguish, like so many other individuals who have endured severe trauma and loss. The art-making process, however, may circumvent the defense mechanisms of the mind and allow for the expression of non-verbal symbols, metaphors, and experiences that are difficult or impossible to articulate in other ways. Emotional trauma persists when individuals feel powerless and unable to take action against crisis and suffering. The act of creating material objects not only may convey unspeakable emotions and conflicts, but it is one way to regain a feeling of control over one's life and these overwhelming emotions. Moreover, the sense of increased self-esteem and the recognition that may result from creating things can help offset feelings of loss, loneliness, and despair.

Hiroyuki Doi, *Untitled*, 2003. Ink on paper, 55 x 27 in. (139.7 x 68.5 cm). Collection American Folk Art Museum, New York; gift of the artist and Phyllis Kind Gallery (2005.20.1). Photograph Gavin Ashworth.

Gregory Van Maanen and one of his paintings in his room in Paterson, New Jersey. Photograph 1993, Ted Degener.

For Vietnam veteran Gregory Van Maanen (born 1947), art making has become a personally transformative and cathartic endeavor, offering a degree of emotional healing from trauma. On February 27, 1969, on the battlefields of Vietnam, the nineteen-year old Van Maanen watched as his fellow infantrymen were killed next to him, and he was shot and left for dead. A

rescue unit later found him, and he spent several months recovering in a hospital before returning to his hometown in Paterson, New Jersey. Back in the States, he was tormented by memories of Vietnam; a bullet is still lodged in his shoulder, a constant reminder of wounds he suffered during the war. For a time he had difficulty speaking about what he experienced, but then he began painting and sculpting as a way to deal with his ongoing struggles with posttraumatic stress. He told me that for him art is a form of medicine and ritual, a way to "release the scenes in my mind."[39] He says the creative process has allowed him to purge negative experiences, sometimes in "a natural flow. . . . It's a way of getting rid of the energies that are fuckin' ya up, ya know?" (quoted in Morris, 2010: 23).

For more than four decades, Van Maanen has painted skulls and eyeballs, ghosts, portals, blasts of light, nightmarish creatures, bullet holes, cruciform images, and cryptic symbols on stones, animal bones, canvases, boards, and other salvaged cast-off materials. A large number of his works depict spirit skulls suspended in interstellar spaces that stare directly at the viewer, alive with hypnotizing eyes, open-mouthed with all-devouring teeth and creature-like vagina dentata tongues. These floating skulls from liminal realms often are surrounded by hovering eyeballs or red "blood eyes," which symbolize the eyes of worldly experience ("When you get splashed with blood, you see things differently, you learn some things").[40] Van Maanen says he works best late at night in quiet solitude, and over the years he filled his small apartment with more than four thousand paintings, sculptures, cast-skulls, and altar-like objects, transforming the space into a protective sanctuary of spirit-infused creations. He does not claim that art making has healed him completely, but he does recognize its therapeutic power, saying it is a necessity and a form of "self-preservation—it's how I get through the day" (quoted in Finkel, 2009: 19). Although his work may disturb with its persistent imagery of skulls, death, lurking spirit forms, and war trauma, he calls his art a "suicide prevention program" and considers his paintings and sculptures to be "good magic," protective talismans to fend off evil (quoted in Rafferty, 2009). Like other apotropaic objects and rituals that are commonly used among individuals in situations of danger and anxiety, both his art and the artistic process protect him, serving as a shield against the onslaught of traumatic memories and dangerous emotional states.

By directly confronting and externalizing images of death and horror, Van Maanen converts these into guardian figures and reminders, as well as

memento mori, and death becomes a familiar presence that he accepts, works with, reflects upon, and no longer fears. When he was wounded on the battlefield in Cù Chi, he says he was "shot into a different dimension. . . . I disappeared off Earth into a world of white light, and I heard a male voice, very calmly say to me, 'Don't worry, you'll talk about this tomorrow,' and then I was back. I've never been the same, ever since" (quoted in Morris, 2010: 18). He says this numinous encounter with death transformed him from a "nasty, stupid kid into a spirit person" and he now refers to the event as his "rebirthday" (quoted in Low, 2009). The beneficent spirit world that he experienced on the battlefield continues to console and protect, a community of spirits that appear to him in visions and dreams, inspiring and guiding his art. "I don't want to sound like a wacko but the spirits are your family. I sense them all the time" (quoted in Morris, 2010: 31, 47, and Wolf, 2007).

Gregory Van Maanen, *Happy Survivor*, 1982–1989. Mixed media on wood. Courtesy of Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York.

Gregory Van Maanen, *Untitled*, 2009. Acrylic on board, 5 ¾ x 3 ¾ in. (14.6 x 9.5 cm). Courtesy Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York.

Gregory Van Maanen, *Untitled*, 2009. Acrylic on board, 11 ¼ x 9 in. (28.6 x 22.9 cm). Courtesy Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York.

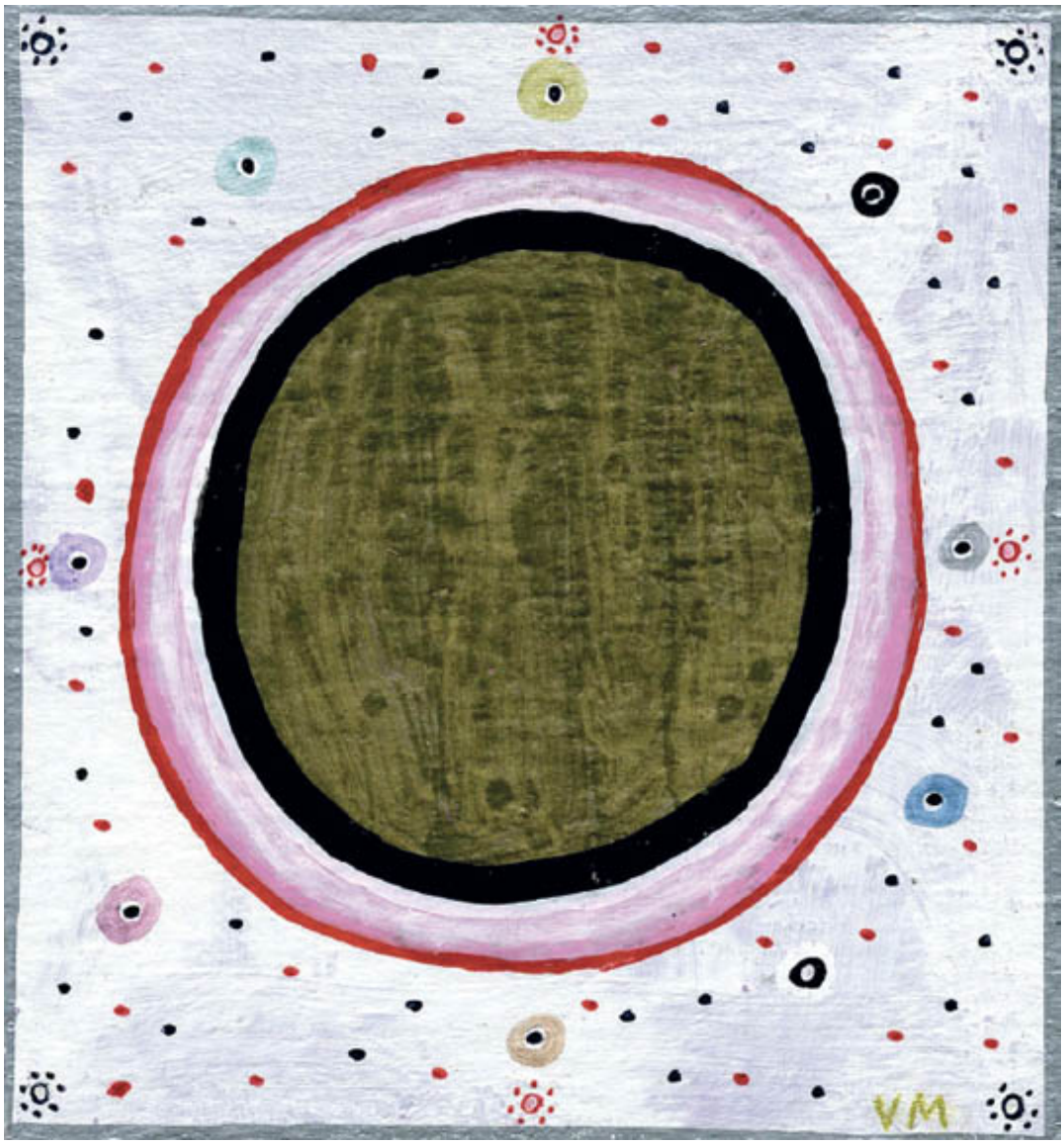
Gregory Van Maanen, *Untitled*, 2009. Acrylic on board, 5 ¾ x 11 ⅛ in. (14.6 x 28.3 cm). Courtesy Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York.

Although Van Maanen says the skull and spirit images that he creates can have a beneficial energy and provide a sense of peace and tranquility, he also states that his art does not always or necessarily comfort him once it is finished. After completing some paintings, he has turned the work against the wall so he will not be haunted by its specter. Art can be therapeutic, but it is dangerous as well, and creating things does not necessarily and magically heal an individual. In this regard, the process of creation is far more important than the artwork produced. As an expression of chaos and emotional pain, such artistic activity may enact a "purification" of the traumatic inner experience, opening up the possibility for self-renewal through the imaginative reshaping of the victim's world, without necessarily resolving past trauma in its entirety (Levine, 2009: 42–44, 63–64).

Sometimes as he is creating a piece or after it is finished, Van Maanen records his thoughts, words, and associated memories on the back side to correspond to the images on the front of the work. The images evoke the verbal or written re-experiencing of events and thoughts, which he addresses with words and symbols: forgiveness, death, hope, bullet, devotion, sacrifice, blood eyes, prayer, rebirth. His method of remembering, identifying, and confronting past experiences in this way resembles what therapists who treat posttraumatic stress disorder generally agree are

important to the recovery process: the ability to discuss or express the traumatic event, recreating or revisiting it in some way, and then exploring and managing its after-effects. By expressing and accepting disturbing thoughts, emotions, and impulses through art making, "purging" them, as it were, these otherwise harmful energies may be contained and used in more constructive ways (Moon, 2008: 83; Rubin, 2010: 86).

Gregory Van Maanen, *Untitled*, 2009. Acrylic on board, 29 x 23 in. (73.7 x 58.4 cm). Courtesy Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York.



Gregory Van Maanen, *Untitled*, 2008, acrylic/board, 3 ¾ x 3 ½ in. (9.5 x 8.9 cm). Courtesy Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York.

In reflecting on the recurring trauma of his war experiences, Van Maanen says, "It's always there, yeah. You have to kind of learn to live with it. The whole experience, the whole thing. You have to learn to manage, that's why the paintings and the sculpture help me so much, 'cause like I said, it's medicine. . . . Art is self-preservation, sometimes shared with others. . . . It's all medicine" (quoted in Morris, 2010: 53). As others have expressed as well, part of the medicine of art is the intense engagement with images and experiences, the creation of order from terrifying disorder, and the flow-like loss of self in the artistic process, which Van Maanen recognizes too: "When

I'm doing something here, I'm lucky, I go into a different dimension that's a natural high that's ah, that's fabulous. It's like an act of meditation. A wonderful place to be" (quoted in Morris, 2010: 47).

Like many other veterans, for years Van Maanen experienced panic attacks, flashbacks, hypervigilence, insomnia, and loss of trust in others, common symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder.[41] He avoided crowded spaces and ventured outside of his apartment only when he had too, spending most of his time painting in his basement, which he calls his "safety bunker." "'Nam vets hang out in basements," he says. "We don't like surprises coming at us" (quoted in Low, 2009). The initial paintings he created in his basement often were expressions of the anger he felt after war, and he now recognizes that producing them was "cathartic in the cleansing process"; his more recent work expresses a sense of peace, transformation, blessings, and thankfulness (Morris, 2010: 31–32). A number of these pieces are mandala-like in their design with no skull imagery whatsoever, and are characterized instead by bold circular forms, cruciform compositions, geometrically balanced patterns, bright colors, and precise symmetrical shapes that sometimes resemble portals or windows into other realms. Having gained some measure of control over war trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder, Van Maanen's art making is now a means of personal power, self-revelation, and transcendence. He says he no longer thinks of his work as "art," but as medicine and prayer created for the purposes of healing and helping humanity, especially other veterans who can relate to the work (Morris, 2010: 21, 38, and Wolf, 2007).[42] In this regard, his use of discarded materials and found objects is significant; these cast-off things, like the Vietnam veterans who were cast aside, broken, and often treated like "garbage" upon their return from the war, are found to have value, salvaged, and transformed through the creative process.

Like Van Maanen, other veterans have realized the value of art, creating work in solitude to document their experiences, express inner pain, bear witness, or remember the dead. Over the years, a number of these pieces have been discovered, with many displayed at the National Veterans Art Museum in Chicago and exhibited elsewhere.[43] Yet despite the acknowledgement of the value of art in relation to trauma, theorists lament the fact that there is relatively little research on the therapeutic use of art in the context of combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder.[44] It is estimated that as many as 30 percent of Vietnam veterans experienced PTSD, although

most did not receive any treatment whatsoever, as PTSD was not then widely acknowledged as it is today.[45] Many soldiers who have returned from combat are still reluctant to seek help because of the stigma attached to PTSD and the continuing perception that getting treatment for psychological wounds is a sign of weakness (Collie et al., 2006: 158). Depression, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, and other problems often occur in association with PTSD, and alcoholism, self-destructive behavior, drug abuse, violence, and suicide are ways that some veterans have dealt with their traumatic experiences. However, soldiers also have sometimes created their own personal therapies in response to the stress and symptoms of PTSD as a way to cope and heal. The self-administered treatments discovered by veterans themselves, whether art making, rituals, transgressive play, storytelling, or other creative acts are testimonies to the possible healing power of vernacular creativity, and may serve as a valuable resource for those who work with veterans, as a grassroots addition to existing therapeutic approaches.[46]

For veterans and other individuals who have experienced extreme trauma, art making offers distinctive therapeutic benefits, particularly as a means of visually expressing and integrating traumatic experiences difficult or impossible to put into words. As discussed, otherwise fragmented or inexpressible memories may be made manifest in a coherent way through visual narrative depictions. Trauma is not only psychological in nature, but it resides in the body as a physiological and sensory experience. The physical activity of art making allows for the possible expression and processing of the sensory memories of traumatic events in ways that verbal expression cannot. The medium of the artwork itself, whether paper, canvas, sculpture, or another form, serves as a manageable "container" for materializing overwhelming emotions, allowing individuals to gain a sense of control over intrusive memories and otherwise unruly responses. In addition, the complete immersion in the creative process, as described by Van Maanen, Talpazan, Sampson, Doi, Andolsek, and others, can assuage inner turmoil, provide a calming effect, and evoke positive feelings of flow or transformation. Furthermore, as illustrated by the accounts of numerous artists discussed in this study, making art and constructing things can enhance self-esteem, help rebuild identity, and serve as a basis for establishing meaningful bonds with others, all of which have significant therapeutic value in the treatment of those who have experienced trauma.[47]

In contextualizing individual suffering and attempting to understand artistic responses to adversity and trauma, it becomes apparent that the creative endeavors of the individuals highlighted in this chapter and throughout this book are not idiosyncratic. Instead, their art making reveals a familiar behavioral response to life crisis and emotional pain: individuals with little or no formal artistic training have discovered the therapeutic aspects of the creative process. Throughout this study, particular emphasis has been placed on specific individuals and the multiple sources that have influenced their work, as well as their views and reasons for making art. Informed by the perspective of folklore studies, this approach offers a more complete understanding of human behavior and artistic expression, regarding the tangible objects that people make not as distinct things, but as manifestations of behavior, formed by the circumstances that influence their creation as well as by the knowledge of existing cultural practices and specific techniques. Instead of conceptualizing people as entirely idiosyncratic and untouched by culture, or celebrating their perceived otherness and ultimately exiling them to the outposts of society, the perspective offered here invites these artists in from the margins, includes them in “our” world, and reveals their connections to culture and broader humanity.

Epilogue

The End of Outsider Art?

In the conclusion of her book *Art Brut: The Origins of Outsider Art* (2001), Lucienne Peiry, the former director of the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, assesses the status of outsider art today and concludes that authentic art brut is dying out. Those who once created such art—the marginalized, the hospitalized, the mentally ill, the "obscure individuals," the prisoners, and the outcasts who "resist society's conventions in all aspects of life"—have become fewer and fewer (2001: 262). The psychiatric asylums and hospitals of the past that confined and treated patients in often brutal and inhumane ways are recalled as hotbeds of "untutored and autistic forms of artistic expression." But now, as institutions have evolved and changed their policies towards mental illness and creativity, implementing art therapy workshops and providing therapeutic drugs to ease the suffering of patients, true art brut, as Peiry and others define it, is disappearing. In line with the views of Dubuffet and numerous other outsider-art aficionados, Peiry concludes that "as soon as artistic expression is actively proposed, encouraged, and supervised in art workshops, Art Brut is neutralized and takes flight. . . . [Despite] some new metamorphosis, it is nevertheless moving down the path toward extinction. Discoveries of new works have dwindled; obviously Art Brut is becoming rarer" (2001: 262–263). Peiry goes on to describe the other factors that have led to the demise of genuine outsider art: the mass media, instantaneous means of communication, and mandatory schooling have combined to eradicate "the self-sufficient life," making it difficult or impossible for individuals to be isolated and unaffected by the cultural conditioning and the corrupting influences of dominant society. The final nail in the coffin of outsider art is its increased acceptance and popularity, as its affectionate promotion by dealers, collectors, museums, publishers, entrepreneurs, and other enthusiasts is killing it softly. "Its institutionalization robbed it of its strangeness. . . . Art Brut is suffering and possibly dying because of the

interest it has aroused" (2001: 263). Peiry is not alone in her assessment here, as other influential players in the world of outsider art debate its future and envision its doom.

While some purists may mourn the predicted death of authentic outsider art, those who condemn the concept, including a number of artists discussed in this study, will feel no regret when the outsider label passes into obscurity and certain people are no longer marked as anticultural Others, stigmatized as primitive or pathological, or classified in dehumanizing or racist ways. A more humane and productive approach recognizes that aesthetic expression is common to all people and that everyone has the ability to creatively transform the ordinary into something extraordinary in aesthetically pleasing and meaningful ways. Artistic behavior is a fundamental and universal human endeavor, existing in every culture and throughout history, recognized as a core tendency that defines our species.[1] All human activities may acquire aesthetic value when they are considered exceptional and attain a recognized quality of "specialness" in terms of the skill required, the mastery of specific techniques, the perfection of forms, and the technical excellence exhibited.[2] From this perspective, the apocalyptic predictions about the demise of astonishing works of art produced by self-taught and vernacular artists (otherwise known as outsiders) are false prophecies. Unique and individualistic forms of artistic expression will persist as long as human beings exist. There will always be people with no formal artistic training who create things in a singular or unconventional way apart from the mainstream of the professional art world. Such individuals will continue to express their life experiences and aspirations, their knowledge and abilities, and their personal and culturally infused artistic visions in a unique manner that is remarkable, unusual, innovative, or strangely familiar. In many cases, their creations have a visual power and resonance that compete with that of the institutionally sanctioned high-art of the academy and are worthy of comparable appreciation and understanding.

The aesthetic activities of the individuals presented in this study express deeply felt emotional, spiritual, cultural, and existential concerns. Their distinctive creative endeavors challenge dominant art-world paradigms and expand our understanding of artistic expression that exists beyond the canons of Western art and conventional notions of artistic expression. Often

marginalized by race, gender, ethnicity, mental illness, or traumatic experiences, and disempowered economically and politically, these artists attempt to assert their voices, communicate significant ideas and values, express cultural heritage, confront adversity, and perhaps change their worlds. Focusing on life experiences, personal meanings, and sociocultural contexts ultimately humanizes so-called outsiders, revealing that they are motivated by concerns and emotions that affect all people. This approach does not diminish the often extraordinary achievements and masterful artistry of these individuals, but uncovers the traditions and commonalities that influence their aesthetic behavior. By understanding such artists, we gain crucial insights into the meaning and power of the creative impulse, and a deeper awareness of the human condition.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. For a revealing ethnographic account of the inner workings of the outsider-art community of collectors, dealers, artists, curators, and institutions, and the production and marketing of self-taught artists, see Gary Alan Fine's *Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity* (2004). Andrew Dietz's *The Last Folk Hero* (2006) also provides an intriguing tale of the politics, relationships, and imagined heroes and villains in the art realm of African American self-taught artists from the South.

2. *Séraphine* was directed by Martin Provost (2008); Jessica Yu directed *In the Realms of the Unreal*: *The Mystery of Henry Darger* (2004); and Mindy Goldberg directed *Junebug* (2005). Other award-winning films that have documented the lives and art of individuals who have been labeled outsider artists are *The Devil and Daniel Johnston* (Feuerzeig, 2006) and *The Cats of Mirikitani* (Hattendorf, 2006).

3. The collector's guide by Sellen (2000) illustrates the explosion of interest in self-taught and outsider art in the United States, with state-by-state listings of the various exhibitions, auctions, galleries, fairs, publications, and museums, as well as brief biographical blurbs on artists. John Maizel's *Outsider Art Sourcebook* (2009) gives a good overview of the field from an international perspective with an introduction to important literature, information on galleries, museums, art fairs, and organizations, and listings of "classic" outsiders and visionaries.

Homer Simpson's excursion into the realm of outsider art is presented in the episode entitled "Mom and Pop Art" (April 1999), in which a gallery owner recognizes Homer's ruined barbeque pit as a tour de force and explains the importance of the work to the baffled Marge Simpson: "Your husband's work is what we call 'outsider art.' It could be by a mental patient, or a hillbilly, or a chimpanzee," at which point Homer gasps excitedly and responds, "In high school I was voted most likely to *be* a mental patient, hillbilly, or chimpanzee!!"

The cartoon series *King of the Hill* had a similar episode, in which Peggy, Hank Hill's wife, is discovered as an outsider artist after she makes "probot" figurines from empty propane tanks, and then later learns that her popularity is based on the fact that her art dealer has "spiced up" her life story, presenting her to the public as an uneducated Appalachian and child bride ("Ceci N'est Pas Une King of The Hill," January 2004).

4. Irwin Chusid's *Songs in the Key of Z: The Curious Universe of Outsider Music* (2000) provides a comprehensive introduction to the phenomenon of outsider music. After releasing recordings of his improvised musical performances, Lonnie Holley, well-known in outsider-art circles, has become a recent addition to the outsider music category, with some writers proclaiming his 2013 album among the best released that year (see Binelli 2014).

5. Information about the Museum of Everything's history, mission statement, exhibits, contributing artists, celebrity involvement, and various products for sale is available on its webpage: http://musevery.com/exhibition1/frame.html.

6. See Boxer (2013), Smith (2013), and Sooke (2013).

7. The label "term warfare" was coined in 1986 by writer and curator Didi Barrett in her introductory essay to the catalog *Muffled Voices: Folk Artists in Contemporary America: PaineWebber Art Gallery, May 16 to September 12, 1986*. Jenifer Borum further explores these definitional debates in her article "Term Warfare" in *Raw Vision* magazine (1993/1994). For a sampling of other significant writings and debates on the terminology, history, and assumptions associated with the concepts of outsider art, art brut, "psychotic art," and the relation of such art to modern art movements, see Dubuffet (1988a, 1988b), Cardinal (1972, 1994), Thévoz (1976), MacGregor (1989), Tuchman and Eliel (1992), Hall and Metcalf (1994), Ames (1994), Cubbs (1994), Jones (1994, 2001), Maizels (1996), Berge (2000), Rhodes (2000), Peiry (2001), Rhodes et al. (2001), Russell (2001, 2011), Fine (2004), Rexer (2005), Danchin (2006), Röske et al. (2006), Crown and Russell (2007), Maclagan (2009), Andera and Stone (2012), Hernández (2013), and Hollander and Rousseau (2014).

Charles Russell, in his edited volume, *Self Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art*, provides a balanced assessment of the variety of terms that have been employed in this field (Russell 2001: 4–34). As he notes, the term "self-taught" has gained traction in recent years and is the least controversial and offensive. The term has the advantage of placing emphasis on the selfhood of the artist and acknowledging individual agency. Somewhat aligned with this view, I use "self-taught" in this study, with the caveat that no individual is entirely self-taught and with the understanding that the works of seemingly self-taught artists are not as idiosyncratic as they appear. While such works may not fall into the category of "folk art," they often are influenced by folkloric traditions, local culture, regional history, and heritage. In many cases, the most appropriate term for such forms of expression is "vernacular art" (used throughout this study and discussed in chapter three). The concept of the vernacular situates the artist in a variety of contexts, traditions, and social interactions, recognizing the artist's individual and seemingly idiosyncratic creativity within a broader dynamic of social and cultural influences.

8. Discussions and debates by folklorists about the definitions of folk art, fine art, outsider art, idiosyncratic art, self-taught art, tradition, community, creativity, and other relevant concepts are included in Bronner (1986, 1996, 2011), Fine (2004), Georges and Jones (1995), Glassie (1989, 1997, 2010), Herman (2011), Jones (1987, 1989, 1994, 1997, 2001), Manley (1989), Pocius (1995), Sherman (1995), Shukla (2008), Toelken (1996), Vlach (1992), Vlach and Bronner (1992), Wojcik (1995), and Zug (1994), among others.

9. In the preface to the catalog for the first major exhibition of outsider art in England (at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1979), Victor Musgrave provides a frequently quoted assessment of outsider artists as primordial avatars of true creativity, free from tradition: "Here is an art without precedent. It offers an orphic journey to the depths of the human psyche, filled with amazing incident, overspilling with feeling and emotion yet always disciplined by superlative technical resources. It is as if we have abruptly stumbled upon a secret race of creative giants inhabiting a land we always knew existed but of which we had received only glimmers and intimations. . . . There is a feeling that they stand not on the margins of art, but at its centre, at the very verge of the sources of creativity whose enigmatic forces they ride like apocalyptic horsemen without any desire to tame them" (Musgrave 1979: 8).

10. See Maneker (2011), Gleadell (2014), and Christie's Press Release (December 3, 2014; http://www.christies.com/about/press-center/releases/pressrelease.aspx? pressreleaseid=7653). Although the market value of outsider art has increased over the past decades, the prices paid for such art are still miniscule compared to established fine artworks; for example, in November of 2013, Francis Bacon's *Three Studies of Lucian Freud* (1969) sold for $142.4 million, setting a record for an auctioned artwork. The current record prices for private sales are $259 million, for Paul Cézanne's

The Card Players (1892/93), and an estimated $300 million for Paul Gauguin's 1892 oil painting *Nafea Faa Ipoipo* (When Will You Marry?).

11. See Johnson (2010), Gómez (2010b), and Schwendener (2011).

12. The features of outsider art, or the lack thereof, have been addressed by Cardinal (1994: 30–35), Jones (1994: 315–317), Maclagan (2009: 15–24), Rexer (2005: 6–10, 75–109), Rhodes (2000:7–22), and Russell (2001: 17–24), among others.

13. Although the term "outsider art" is attributed to Roger Cardinal, apparently it was actually coined by an editor at Studio Vista, the publishing house of Cardinal's book, who found the connotations of the word *brut* as in *Art Brut* (i.e., brute, brutal) unsuitable as an English book title. While the problematic assumptions underlying the "outsider" label are delineated throughout this study, the overall intent of this project is in agreement with Cardinal's stated view of creative activity: "What one should seek is not to analyze the product so much as to attune oneself to the creative process; not to spot masterpieces but to respond to the vitality of the expressive act itself" (1972: 53).

14. See Espinosa and Espinosa (2007) for an investigation into the details of Ramírez's life.

15. For an overview of the ways that Martín Ramírez has been depicted and imagined, see Anderson (2007b: 41–52) and Espinosa and Espinosa (2007).

16. See Cubbs (1994), Metcalf (1994), Jones (1994), Russell (2001: 17–23), Fine (2004: 26–33), Morris (2001), and Maclagan (2009: 25–58).

17. See Metcalf (1994), Cubbs (1994), and Fine (2004: 31–32).

18. For additional biographical information about Ramírez, see Espinosa and Espinosa (2007), Morris (2003), and Anderson (2007b).

19. See Jones (1987, 1989, 1994, 2006), Csíkszentmihályi (1990, 1996), and Dissanayake (1992, 2001). For a general introduction to the research on creativity, see Sawyer (2012).

20. Jones study was first published as *The Hand Made Object and Its Maker* (1975) and later revised and retitled *Craftsman of the Cumberlands: Tradition and Creativity* (1989).

21. Expanding upon Robert A. Georges's (1969) seminal essay on narrating events and a behavioral approach, Jones has proposed the concept of "material behavior" as an alternative to the notion of material culture and the related body of scholarship which he argues overemphasizes the construct of culture, often neglects individual and situational contexts, and ignores the range of factors that influence the creative process (Jones 1997). For an overview of the behavioral perspective within the discipline of folklore studies, see Georges and Jones (1995: 229–312); this perspective is not to be confused with the behaviourist approach within the field of psychology.

22. Thomas Röske, discussion with author, April 7, 2014.

23. The possible link between trauma and creativity among self-taught, folk, and "outsider" artists has been suggested in earlier studies by Jones (1975, 1989) and Manley (1989).

Chapter 2

1. Esman (1988: 160); Beveridge (2001: 595); MacGregor (1989: 72–74). These ancient notions of "divine madness" and mania in fact seem to have been associated more with daemonic and divine inspiration bestowed by the muses than mental illness, although the psychological states apparently were believed to be similar.

2. The creation of patient art also became a possibility after the more humane psychological approaches to the treatment of the mentally ill were introduced by French physician Philippe Pinel and others in the 1790s, when psychiatric patients were increasingly liberated from the chains that

had once been used to prevent their movement and limit the use of their hands. With their hands free, some of them began drawing and making things out of salvaged materials, sometimes secretly and against the rules of the asylum; most of this work was destroyed when asylum guards discovered it.

3. In the first half of the nineteenth century, there was some interest in the therapeutic value of art, theater, "work," and music, for instance by the German psychiatrist Johann Reil (1759–1813) and the Scottish clinician W. A. F. Browne (1805–1885); but as the emphasis in psychiatry shifted to a more medical view, with a focus on brain abnormalities, expressive therapies were largely neglected (Edwards 2014: 22–24).

4. For discussions of outsider art, madness, and "psychotic art," see Beveridge (2001), Cardinal (1972: 16–23), Esman (1988), Gilman (1984), MacGregor (1989), Maclagan (2009: 74–95), and Rhodes (2000: 48–103).

5. Biographical information about Wölfli's life comes from Baumann (2012: 11–31), Cardinal (1972: 55–57), Spoerri (1997: 5–10, 228–229), Spoerri and Baumann (2003: 15–37), and Zemánková et al. (2012: 33–57).

6. For a cinematic portrayal of Emma Hauck and her letters, see the darkly disturbing short film by the Quay brothers, *In Absentia* (2000).

7. See Prinzhorn (1995: 11–34, 270–274) and Beveridge (2001) for discussion of these ideas.

8. See Brand-Claussen (1996: 13–15). Members of the National Socialist movement in 1930s, however, did not distinguish between the works of the mentally ill and that of the Expressionists, condemning them both. Art by the patients included in Prinzhorn's study were used by the Nazis in their infamous Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937 in Munich, to support their thesis that modern art was "pathological" in its perceived resemblance to the art of the mentally ill. Several individuals whose work was included in Prinzhorn's collection were killed in gas chambers, victims of Hitler's "euthanasia" program (Brand-Claussen 1996: 17–20).

9. For an overview of the basic principles of art therapy in the United States, see Malchiodi (2003), Rubin (2010), and the American Art Therapy Association website: http://www.arttherapy.org/aata-history-background.html.

10. Critiques of the Freudian approach are provided by Edwards (2014: 73–77) and Maclagan (2001: 47–60).

11. After his break with Freud in 1913, Jung experienced a series of enigmatic visions and imaginative fantasies that he wrote down and then illustrated in his illuminated calligraphic manuscript *The Red Book* (2009), a process that further convinced him of the therapeutic value of image-making.

12. See Malchiodi (2003: 41–57) for an overview of the influence of Freudian psychoanalytic and Jungian analytic theory on the development of art therapy.

13. For discussion of Navratil and his approach, see Cardinal (1972: 20–23), MacGregor (1989: 313–314), Maclagan (2009: 97–100), Maizels (1996: 84–95), and Rhodes (2000: 92–100).

14. See Gisbourne (1992: 175–183), MacGregor (1989: 314–315), and Rhodes (2000: 100–101).

15. A number of publications and online sources contain conflicting and seemingly erroneous information about Dellschau's life. The most accurate account appears to be Baker-White (2013), which is the main source for the biographical information presented here, supplemented by other descriptions provided in McEvilley (2013).

16. In his tome on Darger, John MacGregor states that the work remains unread in its entirety, and he estimates it would take fifteen years to read the fifteen-volume manuscript from beginning to end (2002a: 680, n. 23).

17. For biographical accounts of Darger's life and possible motivations for his work, see Anderson (2007a), Biesenbach (2009), Bonesteel (2000), Elledge (2013), MacGregor (2002a), and Russell (2011: 101–115).

18. See Bonesteel (2000: 20–21). Jim Elledge asserts that Darger was a traumatized and fearful gay man whose depictions of violence and torture mirror the abuse he suffered as a child and the difficulties of an impoverished life on the margins of society. Elledge maintains that Darger began a homosexual relationship at an early age with his only close friend, William Schloeder, and that Darger's "Vivian Girls with penises" are in fact "girl-boys," "gay boys," and "imitation little girls" that reflect notions about homosexuality that were popular among some gay men and sexologists at the time, as representations of "the psychic hermaphrodites that [Darger], and many around him, associated with belles, fairies, pansies, queens, and queers . . . a female soul enclosed in a male body" (Elledge 2013: 167–168).

19. Information about Bartlett's life is based on Harris (1994) and Kogan (1996).

20. This account of Wenzel's life is based on van Berkum et al. (2000).

21. Gronert, Frits, "Just Inside My Head," http://www.herenplaats.nl/en/kunstenaars/index.asp#, accessed February 21, 2012.

22. Information about Scott's life is based on MacGregor (2002b) and Scott (2000).

23. See Anderson (2007b), Espinosa and Espinosa (2007), and Spoerri and Baumann (2003).

24. See Turner and Klochko (2004) for a survey of outsider photography and the use of photographic elements and collage by a range of self-taught artists.

25. The account of van Genk's life presented here is based on van der Endt (1990, 2014), Walda (1997), van Berkum et al. (1998), van Berkum (2001), and Allegaert et al. (2010). See van der Endt (2014) for a revealing and sensitive account of his thirty-year friendship and working relationship with van Genk.

26. Van Genk interview with Walda (1997), quoted in van Berkum et al. (1998: 108); see van der Endt (2014: 16).

27. Van Genk interview with van der Endt (1986), cited in van Berkum et al. (1998: 114); van der Endt (1990: 18, 23).

28. Van Genk interview with Walda (1997), quoted in van Berkum et al. (1998: 122).

29. See Guerin and Hallas (2007), Levine (2009), and Meek (2009).

30. The characterization provided here is a basic working definition of trauma. For more thorough discussions of the history and theory of trauma, see Herman (1992), Caruth (1996), van der Kolk et al. (1996), Leys (2000), Curtis (2005), and Levine (2009).

31. Psychiatrist Mardi Horowitz (2001) interprets the repetition of intrusive traumatic memories as an attempt on the part of the traumatized psyche to manage the emotional response and master the experience.

32. For studies claiming a neurobiological basis for the "imprinting" of traumatic memory as an eidetic image in the brain, see van der Kolk et al. (1985), van der Kolk (1988), Pitman (1989), Caruth (1996), and van der Kolk et al. (1996). For a critique of the neurobiological approach, see Leys (2000).

33. Drawing on Nietzsche's ideas both of Dionysian tragedy and the eternal return, Levine writes, "We could say that the art of trauma is not an imitation of the past but an opening to the future, an attempt to find a new path beyond the eternal recurrence of the same" (Levine 2009: 42).

34. See Fuentes (1995: 9–13) and Curtis (2005: 61–79).

35. James Brett, Museum of Everything Exhibition #4, Conversation with Daniel Baumann (p. 3); http://musevery.com/exhibition4/pdfs/DanielBaumann.pdf (accessed January 26, 2012).

36. For a sampling of reviews of the museum's exhibits, see Quick (2009), "The Museum of Everything Goes Shopping" (2011), "Museum of Everything: Picture Preview" (2011), and Reeve (2012).

Chapter 3

1. “What is Visionary Art?” from the American Visionary Art Museum website (http://www.avam.org/stuff-everyone-asks/what-is-visionary-art.shtml), accessed June 10, 2011.

2. See Cardinal (2004: 531).

3. See Christian et al. (2010) and Cardinal (2004).

4. A sampling of studies that address the nature and cultural significance of visionary encounters and ecstatic experiences include Bitel (2009), Christian (1996), Christian and Klaniczay (2009), Lewis (1989), Obeyesekere (2012), and Taves (1999).

5. For an introduction to the many works on trance states and the role of shamans and other religious specialists within their communities, see Dubois (2009), Eliade (2004), Harvey (2003), Lévi-Strauss (1963), and Winkelman (2000).

6. See Bentley (2001: 19–21, 367–379) for references to Blake’s visions and his *Visionary Heads* series.

7. See Patterson (1983), Promey (1993), and Ellwood (1979: 74–80) for discussions of the Shaker community, visionary experiences, and gift drawings.

8. In addition to the influence of Swedenborgianism and Mesmerism, scholars have traced the origins of Spiritualism to Harmonialism, Fourierism, and Methodism, among other traditions. For discussion of the Spiritualist movement historically and in various contexts, a sampling of significant works include Braude (2001), Carroll (1997), Cox (2003), Owen (2004), and Taves (1999).

9. Although interest in Spiritualism had declined by the beginning of the twentieth century, the movement experienced a resurgence during and after the devastation of World War I and the influenza pandemic in 1918, the same period in which Gill first became involved.

10. See Braude (2001) and Owen (2003) for discussions of the role of women within the Spiritualist movement and its challenges to existing gender relations, as well as the ways Spiritualism also reinforced certain conventional Victorian definitions of femininity.

11. See Breton (1969: 23–26).

12. Breton’s definition from his 1924 manifesto: “SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” (Breton 1969: 26).

13. Created in a trance state, Gill’s art, with its recurring grids, zigzags, checkered motifs, lattices, spirals, and other geometric patterns exhibits elements that resemble the “form constants” and phosphenes that some researchers declare are often visualized during altered states of consciousness.

14. The discussion of Gill’s early years is based on Cardinal (1972: 135–145), Cardinal (no date), Russell (2011: 60–64), and Ayad (2013).

15. During the 1860s and 1870s, before founding the Theosophical Society in 1875 in New York with Henry Steel Olcott, Blavatsky produced spirit art in the form of portraits and landscapes.

16. See Cardinal (1972: 137) and Russell (2011: 60).

17. Although Bottom’s journalistic excursion identifies the traumatic events and situations of personal crisis that seem to have inspired the art-making process for the individuals he interviews, it is unclear whether he regards the creative process as therapeutic, or as escapist and a crutch, a desperate protection against insanity; though he seems to favor the latter view. The artists’ outraged responses to the way they were depicted by Bottoms may be found in the comments section for his book on the Powell’s Books website (http://ww.powells.com/biblio/17-9780226066851-0) and on the Apocalypse House Web-Log (http://apocalypsehouse.blogspot.com/2007_03_01_archive.html).

18. See Wessinger (2011).

19. TIME/CNN poll, "Apocalypse Now," *Time Magazine*, June 23, 2002; Reuters News/Ipsos Poll, "One in Seven (14%) Global Citizens Believe End of the World is Coming in Their Lifetime," April 30, 2012; *U.S. News and World Report*, "The Christmas Covenant," December 19, 1994, pp. 62 and 64. See Wessinger (2011) for a thorough survey and analysis of the tremendous array of apocalyptic and millennial beliefs historically and cross culturally.

20. The lack of research in this area has been noted by art historian Caroline Crown, one of the few scholars who has attempted to understand the apocalyptic themes in self-taught and vernacular art within broader religious contexts (see Crown 1999, 2004, 2007).

21. For a sampling of the range of descriptions and views of Finster, see Hitt (1987: 52–59), Turner (1989: 160–171, 211–212), Finster and Patterson (1989: 9–25), Mee (1989), Maizels (2002: 57), Bottoms (2007: 5–54).

22. For a perspective on some of Finster's religious views, see Turner (1989), Finster and Patterson (1989), Crown (2007), and Girardot (forthcoming).

23. See Beardsley (1995: 23–24) and Wilson (2007: 7–9). For a nuanced discussion of the various expressions of popular religion in the South, see Wilson (2007).

24. For a description of Finster's vision to paint sacred art, see Finster and Patterson (1989: 123–124) and the account given by his daughter, Thelma Finster Bradshaw (2001: 123–125).

25. See Finster and Patterson (1989: 123) and Turner (1989: 44–45, 220).

26. For an overview and analysis of dynamics and varieties of millennialism, see Partridge (2005: 279–327), Wessinger (2000; 2011), and Wojcik (1997).

27. For discussions of the concept of vernacular religion from the perspective of folklore studies, see Primiano (1995), Howard (2011), and Wojcik (2017); for an introduction to related concepts of "lived religion" and spirituality in everyday life, see Ammerman (2007, 2014), McGuire (2008), and Orsi (2005).

28. See Turner and Dunham (1985: 169) and Finster and Patterson (1989: 22).

29. See Bullard (2010: 5, 84–85) and Wojcik (1997: 176–177). For analyses of the early flying-saucer faith and the religious, mythic, folkloric, and millenarian meanings of UFOs, see Jung (1978), Lewis (1995), Partridge (2003), Wojcik (2003), and Bullard (2010).

30. See Turner (1989: 84–86) and Finster (1989).

31. See Finster (1989), Mee (1989), and Turner (1989: 84–92).

32. See Hughes (1976), Kossy (1994: 243–244), Maizels (1996: 138–139), and MacGregor (1989: 262).

33. Biographical information about Hampton's life is based on the work of Hartigan (1987, 2000), Gundaker and McWillie (2005: 172–179), Foy and McMurrer (1975), and Arnett and Arnett (2001); for a discussion of Hampton's work in the context of the Great Migration and urban folk art, see Hartigan (2000).

34. See Partridge (2005: 279–327) and Wessinger (2011).

35. For a sampling of writings on the notion of the "vernacular," see Baker (1984), Cullum (2000), Gates (1988), Glassie (2000), Howard (2011), Primiano (1995), and Upton and Vlach (1986).

36. See Adele (1989: 16), Lawal (2000: 40–41), and Wahlman (1987).

37. For an account of Jones's life and art, see Steen (1992: 11–28).

38. See Glassie (2010) for an account of the life and art of Prince Twins Seven-Seven.

39. For discussions of Gedewon and Hung Tung, see the essays by Jacques Mercier and Victoria Y. Lu in Carlano (2003: 18–32, 78–93).

40. The importance of dolls in Barra's art and in Vodou tradition in general is analyzed by Cosentino (1998: 15–20).

41. See Cosentino (2012) for a discussion of how contemporary Haitian artists such as the Atis Rezistans sculptors and others have responded to the extreme disasters and adversity that have beset Haiti in recent years.

Chapter 4

1. For an introduction to a variety of art environments, see Beardsley (1995), Brackman and Dwigans (1999), Hernández (2013), Maizels et al. (1999), Manley and Sloan (1997), Umberger (2007), and Ward (1984), and the assorted monographs that focus on individual artists. The nonprofit organization Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments (SPACES), located in Aptos, California, has the largest archival collection of information about art environments globally. Established by Seymour Rosen in 1969, and now directed by Jo Farb Hernández, SPACES is devoted to the study, documentation, and preservation of these often neglected environments.

2. John Maizels speculates that perhaps the prevalence of these environments in France and the United States may be due to the emphasis on individuality in these two countries, "born out of a revolution and regard for individual liberty," as well as fewer bureaucratic restrictions and less social control (Maizels 1999: 16). However, such environments exist throughout the world and in many cases they simply have not been sufficiently documented until recently; see, for example, Hernández's (2013) comprehensive study of forty-five Spanish art environments and Mina's (2011) documentation of imaginary and "irregular" architecture in Italy.

3. In Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, the protagonist Nick Costanza Shay, haunted by the disappearance of his father during childhood, encounters his father's presence in the masterful workmanship of Rodia's towers, as a "kind of swirling free-souled noise, a jazz cathedral. . . . The power of the thing, for me, the deep disturbance, was that my own ghost father was living in the walls" (DeLillo 1997: 277).

4. The biographical information about Rodia's life presented in this section is based on Trillin (1965), Ward (1990: 161–170), Goldstone and Goldstone (1997: 27–42), Hernández (2001), Landler and Byer (2006), and Umberger (2007: 111–125), some of which offers conflicting dates and information.

5. For accounts of the conservation efforts and the ongoing efforts to preserve the Watts Towers and discussions of their meanings within in the local community, see Hernández (2001), Goldstone and Goldstone (1997: 87–103), and Del Giudice (2014a).

6. For instance, folklorist John Vlach (1980) states that Rodia's towers are not the product of any tradition of folk art, but the creation of one individual, working in isolation from any community, and unlike anything else in the world. Historian Richard Cándida Smith similarly seems to regard Rodia's structures as unique, stating, "Not a single element in the composition corresponds to traditional Italian folk art forms" (Smith 1996: 30). In the opinion of art critic Jules Langsner, Rodia's work is "disturbing" and "bizarre" and "lacks the discipline of genuine folk art" (Labyrinth of Watts, 1951: 80).

7. For a discussion of Rodia's towers from a wide range of perspectives, including art historical and architectural readings, see the edited volume by Del Giudice (2014a).

8. For a film depiction of an annual *giglio* festival in the United States, see Porter (1995).

9. See Hale (1953) and Posen and Ward (1985: 155). The Italian contexts of Rodia's work are further explored by Del Giudice (2014b) and Sciorra (2014) and elucidated by interviews with Rodia toward the end of his life, some of which have been retranscribed and annotated by Del Giudice (2014a) in the appendices of her edited volume.

10. Although Rodia expressed antipathy toward institutional religion throughout much of his life, in the 1930s, after he quit drinking, he briefly participated in the tent revivals and other activities of a Spanish-language Pentecostal church in his neighborhood. After he moved to Martinez in 1954, he would not attend church with his relatives, but he would stand outside with pocketfuls of silver dollars that he would give to children after the service (Landler and Byer 2006).

11. Rodia quoted in the article "Labyrinth of Watts," *Time Magazine* 58 (September 3, 1951): 80.

12. Numerous catalogs and publications continue to refer to Chand as a "classic outsider" or a "master of outsider art"; for example, one of the more insightful volumes on Chand is entitled *Nek Chand's Outsider Art* (Peiry and Lespinasse 2006). For Chand as a "crackpot," see Kearns (2010); for a typical disclaimer that Chand is not mad, see John Maizels, quoted in Steward (1997).

13. See Ovshinsky's film *The Voodoo Man of Heidelberg Street* (1989) for a documentation of the positive and negative responses to Guyton's project by members of the community during the early years of its creation.

14. Interview with author, April 15, 2006.

15. Conversation with author, November 17, 2011.

16. Interview with author, April 15, 2006.

17. See Heidelberg Project (2004), Shibley et al. (2005: 157), and Heidelberg Project (2011).

18. Interview with author, April 15, 2006.

19. Interview with author, April 15, 2006.

20. For consideration of Guyton's project from a variety of viewpoints, see the edited volume *Connecting the Dots: Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project* (Heidelberg Project 2007).

21. Interview with author, April 15, 2006; Heidelberg Project (no date); Alvin (2006).

22. See Simmons (2011). In a few instances, local residents have rallied to protect an endangered environment, with Rodia's towers and Chand's garden among the more notable examples, as well as Leonard Knight's three-story high Salvation Mountain, built in a remote part of the Southeastern California desert known as Slab City. Constructed on state land, Knight's mountain was molded out of adobe clay and painted with more than a hundred thousand gallons (380,000 liters) of donated paint, but in 1994 county authorities condemned the site as a health hazard and "toxic nightmare," with high amounts of lead in the soil, until the locals fought the ruling (Manley and Sloan 1997: 78). Volunteers have been working to maintain the site since Knight's death in 2014, but its future is uncertain.

23. See Noriyuki (1995: E6), Heidelberg Project (2011), and Che (2007: 45).

24. See Montemurri et al. (1989), Irwin (1990), Whitfield (2000: 192), and the Detroit Residential Parcel Survey (2010: 16–24).

25. Interview with author, April 15, 2006.

26. Interview with author, April 15, 2006.

27. See Gundaker for the general themes in African American yard displays (1998: 14–15).

28. Interview with author, April 15, 2006.

29. Interview with author, April 15, 2006; Heidelberg Project (no date).

30. Interview with author, April 15, 2006.

31. See Santino (1986: 160–165; 2001: 50–51, and 2011). Santino applies the concept of the "ritualesque" to refer specifically to public displays and cultural events that express political commentary and that are performed to accomplish social change and transformation (2011).

32. See Lévi-Strauss (1966: 19), Hebdige (1979: 102–127), de Certeau (1984), Jenkins (1992), and Wojcik (1995: 11–20).

33. Conversation with author, November 17, 2011.

34. Interview with author, April 15, 2006.

35. See Cooper (2008). It is believed that the first bottle houses were built in Nevada and California in the early 1900s, and numerous folk environment builders have used recycled bottles as construction material. The idea of mass producing bottles that could be used to build structures was briefly explored by Alfred (Freddy) Heineken (1923–2002), the president of the Dutch brewing company Heineken International. When he was on the Caribbean island of Curaçao in 1960, during a world tour of Heineken factories, he was dismayed by the beaches there that were littered with bottles, and he was upset by the poor living conditions and lack of affordable building materials. He came upon a possible solution to both problems with the idea of designing "a brick that holds beer"—a beer bottle that could be recycled as construction material. After three years of experiments, in 1963 the Heineken WOBO (world bottle) was produced, a bottle that could be laid horizontally, interlocked, and bonded with mortar to build walls. Although several WOBO buildings were designed, the project never really developed further, and there are only two of these bottle structures still in existence, both of them on the Heineken estate in Noordwijk, near Amsterdam (Kriscenski 2011).

36. Prisbrey's Dolls' Head planter served as the cover for the popular 12-inch single, *Mexican Radio* (1982), by the Los Angeles post-punk band, *Wall of Voodoo*.

37. For a study of another American environment that was constructed in the mid-1950s by a self-taught female builder, see Chittenden's (1984) essay on the house and sculpture garden created by Veronica Terrillion (1908–2003) in Northern New York. The environment by Mary Nohl (1914–2001), constructed around her cottage on the Lake Michigan shore in the 1960s and 1970s, has been documented by Manger and Smith (2008) and Umberger (2007: 274–301). The circumstances surrounding the construction of the Owl House by Helen Martins (1897–1976), in Nieu-Bethesda, South Africa, one of the best-known art environments created by a woman, are detailed by Beardsley (1995: 53–58) and Ross and Martins (1997).

38. See Cooper (2008) and SPACES/Preserve Bottle Village Committee (1999). The nonprofit group Preserve Bottle Village acquired the property in 1986 and has worked to restore and document the damaged structures.

39. See Jones (1975: 164–166) for a discussion of grief, bereavement, and the creative process.

40. Prisbrey's embracing of the past resembles that of the painter Jessie Rhoads (1900–1972), who took up memory painting toward the end of her life during her struggle with a serious illness. As folklorist Margaret Yocom documents, Rhoads's paintings were nostalgic depictions of happier times as young girl, farm life, children's play, and family dinners, expressing her memories and need for "a cheerful, secure past as she faced the insecurity of a life-threatening illness. Her paintings, these pictorial life reviews, were, as she said, 'wonderful therapy'" (Yocom 1984: 43). In a similar manner, the chairmaker Chester Cornett seems to have dealt with the tremendous hardship of his life by idealizing the ways of the past with his techniques of making "old fashioned chairs," embracing a "Li'l Abner" style of dress, and through nostalgic recollections and a yearning for his "Old Kentucky Mountain Home" (Jones 1989: 80–112).

Chapter 5

1. Revised and retitled *Craftsman of the Cumberlands: Tradition and Creativity* (Jones 1989).

2. The personal stories relating to the quilt, the processes of creating it, and its cultural impact is documented in the Academy Award-winning film, *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (Epstein et al. 2004).

3. See also Kemp and Boyer (1994: 86–88).

4. See Holley (2001) for an extensive autobiographical account of his life, as well as Binelli (2014) and Kemp and Boyer (1994: 86–90) for additional details.

5. See also Parkes (1986) and Parkes et al. (1997).

6. This observation about the mourner moving back and forth between passivity and aggression appears to be roughly equivalent to the alternating phases of numbness and despair, anger and reorganization, proposed by Bowlby (1961, 1973, 1979).

7. See Small (2001) for a review of the evolving trends in theorizing grief and mourning presented here.

8. Interview with author, October 9, 2010.

9. See Scruton (2014) for a more detailed account of Tripp's Mindfield.

10. Email message to author, October 15, 2014.

11. Interview with Fred Scruton, May 2013.

12. See Billy Tripp, "The Mindfield—A Life of One," at https://sites.google.com/site/billytripp/home.

13. Conversation with author, October 5, 2014.

14. Conversation with author, October 5, 2014; email message to author, October 10, 2014.

15. Conversation with author, October 5, 2014; email message to author, October 6, 2014..

16. Email message to author, October 10, 2014.

17. Email message to author, October 6, 2014.

18. Email message to author, October 10, 2014, October 27, 2014.

19. Email message to author, October 10, 2014.

20. Email message to author, October 29, 2014.

21. The predominant themes expressed in African American home ground displays and yard shows are discussed by Gundaker (1998: 14–16).

22. Interview with Kevin Blythe Sampson, John Michael Kohler Arts Center (October 2014); http://www.youtube.com/embed/K_D05qwbNkk.

23. Email message to author, October 6, 2014.

24. Cox (2002); Kevin Blythe Sampson, personal communication to author, October 6, 2014.

25. Email message to author, October 27, 2014.

26. Email message to author, October 6, 2014.

27. Interview with author, February 9, 1999.

28. Interview with author, November 10, 1999.

29. Interview with author, November 10, 1999.

30. Interview with author, November 10, 1999.

31. Interview with author, February 28, 2000.

32. Interview with author, February 28, 2000.

33. Interview with author, November 10, 1999.

34. Interview with author, February 28, 2000.

35. See Jung (1978), Lewis (1995), Partridge (2003), Wojcik (2003), and Bullard (2010).

36. Some Jungian art therapists, such as Joan Kellogg, consider mandalas to be such powerful and archetypal images that patients are explicitly encouraged to draw them. In Kellogg's view, the mandalas her patients create function both as a form of therapy and as a means of projective testing that allows her to form a personality profile to diagnose and understand them (Kellogg 1984: 6). She asserts that there are commonalities in drawings that relate to specific disorders, and not only the

mandala but the color of the drawing is regarded as a reflection of the consciousness of that person; the drawn mandala is a "chalice for receiving all the contents of consciousness" and a mirroring of the self that allows for an internal dialogue with the non-verbal part of the individual (Kellogg 1984: 20, 33–35). In her diagnosis, Kellogg correlates certain colors with distinct emotional states or conditions (e.g., black and pink indicate self-destructive tendencies; a rainbow symbolizes female fertility and "the cosmic vagina," as a psychological representation of new birth and transition [Kellogg 1984: 53–83]).

37. In September 2015, after this manuscript was completed, Ionel Talpazan died at the age of sixty.

38. Email message to author, January 21, 2012.

39. Conversation with author, November 18, 2007.

40. Conversation with author, November 18, 2007.

41. See Collie et al. (2006: 157–158) and the American Psychiatric Association (1994) for discussion of the symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

42. In 2007, when Van Maanen moved from New Jersey to upstate New York, the thousands of works that filled his apartment were acquired by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, which is conserving and cataloguing them.

43. See Sinaiko (1998) and Kykisz and Moore (2004). Initiated by a group of veterans in 1981, the National Veterans Art Museum (formerly the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum), has been at the forefront of increasing public awareness about the importance of artistic expression among veterans.

44. See Collie et al. (2006: 159–160) and Malchoidi (2012: 320).

45. See Razza and Tomasulo (2005: 202) and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website on PTSD: http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp

46. See Mechling (2011). Storytelling appears to be the expressive form most commonly used in therapeutic contexts with veterans. Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, known for comparing PTSD among Vietnam veterans with the experiences of war described in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, argues that it is the social process of telling stories of one's traumatic experiences that provides healing; he calls this the "communalization of trauma," as these often untold stories, when shared with and understood by others, empower trauma survivors and help them regain faith in collective social interaction (Shay 1994, 2002). In her work with women who have experienced domestic violence, folklorist Elaine Lawless (2001) similarly discusses how the expression of trauma narratives in a safe and communal setting may be beneficial and transformative, helping to restore identity and empower those who have been assaulted and abused.

47. See Collie et al. (2006) and Malchoidi (2012) for discussion of the possible usefulness of art therapy as treatment for military personnel with combat-related PTSD.

Epilogue

1. See Dissanayake (1992), Dutton (2009), and Jones (2006).

2. See Boas (1955: 9–10), Dissanayake (1992), and Jones (1989: 252–259).

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